Lesson 19: The Unraveling - Abstraction in the Modern Era

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“The Unraveling Abstraction in the Modern Era” is part of the

ART APPRECIATION
Open Educational Resource

by Marie Porterfield Barry
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Introduction

This course explores the world’s visual arts, focusing on the development of visual awareness, assessment, and appreciation by examining a variety of styles from various periods and cultures while emphasizing the development of a common visual language. The materials are meant to foster a broader understanding of the role of visual art in human culture and experience from the prehistoric through the contemporary.

This is an Open Educational Resource (OER), an openly licensed educational material designed to replace a traditional textbook.

Course Materials

Presentations
The course materials consist of 24 presentations examining art across the globe from prehistory though the contemporary art world. These introduce key vocabulary, explore the way that culture and art are linked, describe the varying methods and techniques of the featured artists, and encourage classroom discourse.

Reading Lists
Each of the 24 presentations has an accompanying reading list which provides links to articles, videos, and other resources. The reading list is meant to reinforce and clarify information covered in each of the presentations.

Sample Assignments
A list of sample assignments is also included. Ranging from brief essays to simple art projects, these are designed to be completed in a sketchbook to more deeply explore course concepts. Intended to encourage learners to think like artists, art critics, and art historians, assignments emphasize practices of creative thinking and artistic method, while reinforcing concepts addressed in classroom lectures and required readings.
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Adopting, Adapting, or Expanding the Resource
The goal for this OER is to build an educational resource that is flexible enough to address concepts relevant to the contemporary discourse and scholarship in the visual arts. For those interested in utilizing these course materials, I am providing below some additional information that may be useful in expanding, adapting, or reinterpreting the materials. Editable versions are available in Microsoft PowerPoint and Word at https://dc.etsu.edu/art-appreciation-oer/

The font used to create the presentations and written documents for this OER is Calibri.

Finding Additional Readings, Lessons, and Articles
Smarthistory: https://smarthistory.org/
Smarthistory is an extensive open educational resource which publishes outstanding essays and video lectures about art. The Creating + Conserving section of Smarthistory includes wonderful informational articles and videos about materials and processes: https://smarthistory.org/tag/conservation/

MoMA Learning: https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/
MoMA Learning provides a wonderful selection of essays on works of modern art and also has assignment suggestions at the bottom of each section.

KhanAcademy: https://www.khanacademy.org/
Khan Academy is an outstanding platform of open educational resources covering a variety of academic and scholarly topics.
Trivium Art History: https://arthistoryproject.com/
Trivium Art History is a free, online art history book with clean design and approachable descriptions of works of art, periods of art history, and fun artist biographies. The Themes of Art section is a nice tool to helping students explore works that match their interests. The World of Art section is a useful tool for an exploratory World Art sketchbook prompt. The Timeline section is useful, as it separates works of art into galleries based on period.

Introduction to Art: Design, Context, and Meaning: https://oer.galileo.usg.edu/arts-textbooks/3/
For a more traditional, textbook approach, there is an Introduction to Art open educational resource textbook available.

Locating Images
If you are utilizing the course materials and would like to add new images that are public domain or licensed under Creative Commons, there are several useful tips provided below for finding images.

The Met Museum: https://www.metmuseum.org/
The Met has an option to search for Open Access images within the collection here. Make sure that the “Open Access” box is checked. The image license is CC0 1.0, and will be marked OA Public Domain at the lower left of the image.

Google Images: https://www.google.com/imghp?hl=en&tab=wi&ogbl
Google Images has an option under “Settings” > “Advanced Search” to search by “Usage Rights”. Choosing “Free to use share or modify” will allow a search for images suitable for expanding our OER.

Wikimedia Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/
Wikimedia Commons is an outstanding resource for finding open source images, with a strong collection of works of art.

Flickr: https://www.flickr.com
Flickr allows users to specify image licenses on uploaded photographs. Click “Some rights reserved” at the lower right of the image to check the licensing. Some images will say “Public Domain” or will be licensed under a Creative Commons (CC) license, allowing for the use in an OER.

Smarthistory Flickr: https://www.flickr.com/groups/smarthistory/pool/
The Smarthistory Flickr is expansive with images licensed for educational purposes.

Acknowledgements
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THE UNRAVELING:
Abstraction in the Modern Era

Cubism – Abstract Expressionism – Minimalism

Mark Rothko, No. 3/No. 13, Oil on canvas, 1949, Author: Steven Zucker, Cropped from original, Source: Flickr, License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
Artists since Impressionism had been working in increasingly abstracted styles, opening new avenues for exploration for the artists of subsequent generations.
PABLO PICASSO & the Invention of CUBISM
Pablo Picasso was a prolific and renowned artist during his lifetime. An artistic child prodigy, Picasso’s career was long and varied.
Picasso's early works, during the Blue Period and the Rose Period, were emotive and were based upon contemporary people that the artist encountered.
During Picasso’s Blue Period, paintings such as *La Vie* depicted the struggles of loss, loneliness, and poverty.
During his Rose Period, Picasso continued to paint outcasts living on the margins of society, such as in the painting of traveling performers, *Family of Saltimbanques*. Paintings from this period are characterized by the dominance of pink and orange.
When the young artist encountered two monumental paintings, one by Cézanne and the other by Matisse, from 1906, Picasso made a grand response to these.

Paul Cézanne, *Les Grandes Baigneuses (The Large Bathers)*  
Oil on canvas, 1906.  
Author: Google Art Project, Source: Wikimedia Commons,  
License: Public Domain

Henri Matisse, *Le Bonheur De Vivre (The Joy of Life)*  
Oil on canvas, 1905-1906.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons, License: Public Domain
Picasso responded to the paintings of Cézanne and Matissee with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, or *The Young Ladies of Avignon.*
Both Cézanne’s *Large Bathers* and Matisse’s *The Joy of Life* are inhabited by abstracted classical-style figures lounging in vast utopian landscapes.
Picasso’s *The Young Ladies of Avignon*, quite differently, is set within a compressed space. The figures are sharp and angular.

The claustrophobic and jagged negative space does not reference classical utopian landscapes, but rather implies a modern urban space.

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Pablo Picasso

*Les Demoiselles D’Avignon*

*(The Young Ladies of Avignon)*

Oil on canvas, 1907.


License: Public Domain (US)
A sense of the remoteness and isolation of the figures remains from Picasso’s earlier works from the Blue Period and the Rose Period. The color and light from these scenes of modern urban life infuses *The Young Ladies of Avignon*. 

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Pablo Picasso
*Family of Saltimbanques, 1905.*
Source: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pablo_Picasso)
License: Public Domain (US)

Picasso, *La Vie, 1903*
Source: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pablo_Picasso)
License: Public Domain (US)
Departing from the softness of his earlier figures, however, Picasso discovers a more aggressive, urban, and modern way of expressing these female figures.

The two figures on the right seem to wear masks. By 1907, Picasso has begun collecting various African masks from which he derives some of his forms.
Picasso collected African masks which informed his works during this period.

Fang mask from Gabon similar to the ones Picasso would have used for inspiration.

Author: Marie-Lan Nguyen
Source: Wikimedia Commons
License: Public Domain
Avignon was a street in Barcelona’s red light district that was home to a brothel that Picasso once frequented.

These women, then, are meant to represent five prostitutes. Picasso presents the female figures with a balance of seductiveness and menace. The openness of their poses contrasts vividly with the sharpness of their edges.
Picasso presents a painting that is about both desire and fear. The viewer is placed in the position of looking with the male gaze upon a group of sexually available women. The women’s mask-like faces gaze out at us, but offer little suggestion of sentience.
We are at once looking across a row of upright figures while also peering down at the reclining figure with a single elbow raised.
The second figure from the left seems to be reclining. Notice the shift of her torso and her relaxed, bent knees. We see more detail in her body and more softness, too, than in the other figures. The fruit (a traditional symbol of sexuality) seems to point toward her, as well.
The softness and three-dimensionality of the human forms being simplified into geometric shapes is a precursor to Cubism.
CUBISM was an art movement created by Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, which focused on exploring the geometric planes of forms within a compressed space.
The earliest form of Cubism, called Analytic Cubism, attempts to analyze form by breaking it into geometric planes.

This austere form of abstraction is void of expressionistic tendencies. Color is also nearly removed from Cubist painting. By working within a limited palette of neutral tones, the Cubist artist forces the viewer to confront the form and composition.

In a later phase of Cubism, called Synthetic Cubism, artists began including collage elements into the Cubist compositions.

Pablo Picasso

*Ma Jolie*

Oil on canvas, 1910-1911.

Author: Steven Zucker

Source: Flickr

License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

The face is distinctly visible within the portrait as are hands toward the bottom of the picture plane. However, the rest of the space seems to dissolve into pure geometric form.

Pablo Picasso
*Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler*
Oil on canvas, 1910.
© 2018 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. 
[Educational Fair Use](#), High quality image [here](#).
In *Ma Jolie*, or “My Pretty One”, Picasso depicts a woman with a guitar. Within the image, Picasso suggests multiple views within time and space as the figure and form seem to shift about within the composition.
Picasso completely obscures the face in *Ma Jolie* and instead uses the text at the bottom of the painting as well as a treble clef symbol to help the viewer interpret the image. The strings of the guitar may also be recognized throughout the painting, creating the illusion of motion and movement in time to the music.

Pablo Picasso
*Ma Jolie*
Oil on canvas, 1910-1911.
Author: Steven Zucker
Source: Flickr
License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
Analytic Cubism is influenced by Cèzanne’s “moving eye” technique and the process of examining form in order to break it into flattened geometric planes.


Right: Pablo Picasso, *Ma Jolie*, Oil on canvas, 1910-1911. Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr, License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Willem de Kooning, Woman I, Oil on canvas, 1950-52. Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr, License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Following World War II, Europe was in ruins. The political and economic strength shifted to the United States and New York City became the epicenter of the art world. Many European artists had fled to New York to escape the war, which increased the vibrancy of the art scene there.

A group of artists known as Abstract Expressionists emerged with uniquely American artistic identities who radically reimagined Modernism.
Abstract Expressionists were interested in communicating on a primal or spiritual level through the use of color and abstract form.

The Abstract Expressionists can be loosely divided into two groups: Action Painting and Color Field Painting. Although in many ways the works made by the two groups appear radically different, they share the core focus of communicating some primal, or spiritual, truth.
ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Abstract Expressionism was influenced by Carl Jung and the concept of the collective unconscious. Abstract Expressionist paintings, self-contained and self-referential, present sublime worlds inhabited by universal symbolic forms.
Describe this painting.

Jackson Pollock, *Number 1, 1949* on display at MOCA, Los Angeles, CA. Enamel and metallic paint on canvas. Author: Rocor, Source: Flickr, License: CC BY-NC 2.0. Educational Fair Use, High quality image [here](#).
Jackson Pollock was interested in Jung’s theory that visual images have the ability to tap into the primordial consciousness of viewers. He pushed beyond the Surrealist technique of automatic painting with a new method called *Action Painting*. 
**Action Painting** is a method of painting in which the activity of making the painting is recorded within the color and brushstrokes. The painting exists as a record of the primal process of painting.
Jackson Pollock made his iconic drip paintings by rolling massive canvases out on the studio floor and dripping layer after layer of paint over them. He moved around the canvas, painting from all edges.
Pollock’s compositions lack hierarchical arrangements. All parts of the picture plane are treated equally. The paintings do not have a set focal point, nor an external subject.
His paintings become self-contained labyrinths in which the viewer may become submerged.
Describe this painting.

Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*, Oil on canvas, 1950-52. Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
The paintings of Willem de Kooning appear at first glance to be purely gestural and spontaneous. Vivid color and active brushwork cover the entire surface of the painting.

Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*, Oil on canvas, 1950-52. Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
In *Woman I* we find a grotesque portrait of a female figure emerging from a field of color and gestural brushstrokes.

Part prehistoric fertility statue and part monstrous scrape of paint, Willem de Kooning’s *Woman I* shocked the art world.

Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr  
License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
In 1950, what might have been shocking about *Woman I*?

Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*, Oil on canvas, 1950-52. Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
The shocking aspect of *Woman I* was the reemergence of the figure from the mid-century canon of modernist pure abstraction.

Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*, Oil on canvas, 1950-52. Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
Franz Kline’s *Chief (left)* and Barnett Newman’s *Vir Heroicus Sublimis (right)* are both from 1950 and are characteristic with the kinds of work popular in the mid-20th century New York art world.
While the painting appears spontaneous and happenstance, Willem de Kooning carefully planned his compositions. He repainted, scraped, and reworked the surface of the painting many times.
Woman I took 2 years to complete. Elaine de Kooning (artist and wife of Willem) estimated that her husband scraped and repainted it nearly 200 times.
Looking at the surface of the painting, the layers of paint are clearly visible. The richness of the color and texture are produced by the careful layering of the paint over time.

Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*, Oil on canvas, 1950-52. Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr, License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
The motions of the artist in the act of creation are recorded within these layers of marks, communicating on a deeper subconscious level.

Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*, Oil on canvas, 1950-52. Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr, License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
“ART NEVER SEEMS TO MAKE ME PEACEFUL OR PURE.”

-Willem de Kooning

Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*, Oil on canvas, 1950-52. Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr 
License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
COLOR FIELD PAINTING is another type of Abstract Expressionism. Decidedly stiller in appearance than Action Painting, Color Field Paintings consist of large fields of color meant to evoke a transcendent, contemplative mood.
How does this painting make you feel?

Mark Rothko, No. 3/No. 13
Oil on canvas, 1949
Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr,
License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
Mark Rothko sought to create meditative paintings in front of which viewers would stand silent, or weep.

Mark Rothko, No. 3/No. 13
Oil on canvas, 1949
Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr,
License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
Rothko preferred large, flat planes of color as he was not interested in illusion; he believed that the flat forms could communicate truth.
“I'm not an abstractionist. I'm not interested in the relationship of color or form or anything else. I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on.”

— Mark Rothko

Mark Rothko, No. 3/No. 13
Oil on canvas, 1949
Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr, License: [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/)
The soft-edged horizontal forms within Rothko’s paintings evoke a sense of peacefulness that encourages stillness.

The hazy quality of the paintings as the edges of the rectangular forms softly fade discourage the eye from moving rapidly around the canvas. Instead, one’s eyes may move slowly about without losing sight of the whole.

The horizontal forms feel expansive yet they end before the edge of the canvas. In this way, they evoke that which is self-contained within the painting.

Mark Rothko, No. 3/No. 13
Oil on canvas, 1949
Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr, License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
Donald Judd, *Untitled (Stack)*, lacquer on galvanized iron, twelve units, each 22.8 x 101.6 x 78.7 cm, installed vertically with 9" intervals, 1967, installed at MoMA. Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr, License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
Minimalism grew out of the Abstract Expressionist movement, largely influenced by color field painting, yet rejecting and reacting against concepts such as the emotion of the artist, the spiritual significance of the work, or the value of the artifact.
Growing out of the Abstract Expressionist movement, Minimalist artists produced works of art that were austere nonrepresentation and which concealed the hand of the artist. Embracing materials from manufacturing, Minimalists made works of art that were deliberately devoid of emotion and individuality.
Describe this work of art.

Donald Judd, *Untitled (Stack)*, lacquer on galvanized iron, twelve units, each 22.8 x 101.6 x 78.7 cm, installed vertically with 9" intervals, 1967, installed at MoMA. Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr, License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
Donald Judd’s *Untitled (Stack)* consists of 9 boxes of equal size, made of iron painted with lacquer, arranged without hierarchy. They are mathematically constructed and hung in a vertical row on the gallery wall, with each unit spaced 9 inches from the next.
Untitled (Stack) resembles a factory assembly line with each of the boxes identical and equally important. For the artist, the box was the preferred form as it is neutral and holds no symbolic value.
Donald Judd, *Untitled (Stack)*, lacquer on galvanized iron, twelve units, each 22.8 x 101.6 x 78.7 cm, installed vertically with 9" intervals, 1967, installed at MoMA. Author: Steven Zucker, Source: Flickr, License: CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
“No to transcendence and spiritual values, heroic scale, anguished decisions, historicizing narrative, valuable artifact, intelligent structure, interesting visual experience.”

-Robert Morris, Minimalist artist and writer
The modernism of the mid-20th century, beginning with Cubism through Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, denies the viewer many things once expected in works of art.

Herein, we find no sense of hierarchy and, regularly, no subject on whom to focus. The titles of works are deliberately vague, descriptive, or numerical. There are few direct references to the history of art and certainly no appropriation from contemporary popular culture. The works are self-contained, self-referential, and intended for the white cube of the gallery.

But soon a new generation of artists will emerge...
Reading List: 19_The Unraveling-Abstraction in the Modern Era

Article about Picasso’s Early Works (Blue Period and Rose Period):
https://smarthistory.org/picassos-early-work/

Article on Picasso’s Blue Period:
https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-emotional-turmoil-picassos-blue-period

Video Lecture and Article about Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon:
https://smarthistory.org/pablo-picasso-les-demoiselles-davignon/

MoMA explains Cubism:
https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/cubism/

“Inventing Cubism” article:
https://smarthistory.org/inventing-cubism/

MoMa explains Picasso’s Ma Jolie:
https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/pablo-picasso-ma-jolie-paris-winter-1911-12/

Tate’s entry about Cubism with explanation of the differences between Analytic Cubism and Synthetic Cubism:
https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/cubism

An article introducing Abstract Expressionism:
https://smarthistory.org/abstract-expressionism-an-introduction/

Video lecture about Jackson Pollock:
https://smarthistory.org/why-is-that-important-looking-at-jackson-pollock/

Video lecture about the technique of Jackson Pollock:
https://smarthistory.org/the-painting-techniques-of-jackson-pollock/

Video lecture about Willem de Kooning’s Woman I:
https://smarthistory.org/de-k-woman/

Article from MoMa about Willem de Kooning’s Woman I, including about the way in which some saw the reemergence of the figure as betrayal:

Video lecture about Rothko’s No.3/No.13:
https://smarthistory.org/mark-rothko-no-3no-13/

Rothko quote “I’m not an Abstractionist” is available here:
https://manhattanarts.com/different-views-of-abstract-art/
MoMA on Abstract Expressionism and the divine (Rothko):
https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/abstract-expressionism/the-sublime-and-the-spiritual/

MoMa on Rothko:

Video lecture on the case for Minimalism, which includes Robert Morris quote:
https://smarthistory.org/case-for-minimalism/

MoMA on Minimalism:
https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/minimalism/

MoMa on Donald Judd *Untitled (Stack)*:

Video lecture on Donald Judd *Untitled*, different version:
https://smarthistory.org/donald-judd-untitled/

MoMA on Dan Flavin:
https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/dan-flavin-monument-1-for-v-tatlin-1964/
Sketchbook Assignment: 19 _The Unraveling – Abstraction in the Modern Era_

*(Based on project from MoMA Learning on Abstract Expressionism: The Sublime and the Spiritual)*

Abstract Expressionists use gesture and color to evoke certain moods or feelings. How can you express emotion in an entirely abstract drawing? Choose two emotions, one positive and one negative, and make an abstract drawing for each using shape, line, and color to express the emotion. Avoid figurative elements like faces or hearts. Think instead about how a jagged versus a smooth line communicates, or the way that different colors evoke different feelings. Write the name of the emotion on each of your drawings.