

Modern and Contemporary Art

What is modern art and what makes it look the way it does? This lesson explores changing styles and ideas in European and American art from Impressionism to Cubism to the art of today.

Grade Level

Grades 4–12

Common Core Academic State Standards

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1](#)
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6](#)

National Visual Arts Standards

- Responding: understanding and evaluating how the arts convey meaning
- Connecting: relating artistic ideas and work with personal meaning and external context

C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards

- Dimension 2: History – Change, Continuity, and Context

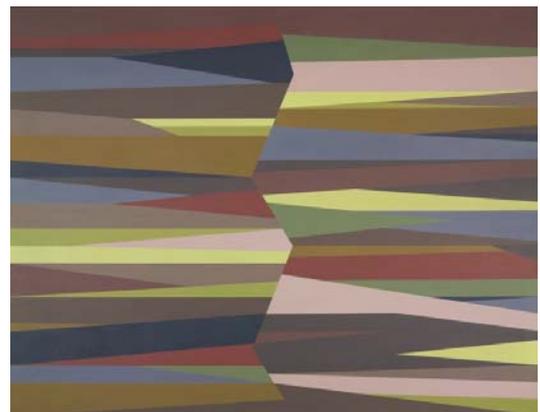
Suggested Learning Goals

Students will be better able to:

- Analyze the progression of artistic styles and themes from academic art to the contemporary era
- Discuss how artists challenge the definition and rules of art
- Use visual and contextual evidence to explore the role of ambiguity and multiple interpretations in modern artwork
- Express their individual opinions of a work of art and recognize the different opinions of their classmates

Essential Questions

- What is modern art and what makes it look the way it does?
- How does modern art reflect modern life?
- How can our own personality and experiences impact our connection to a work of art?



Rift, December 2003

Odili Donald Odita, American, born Nigeria

Acrylic on canvas

7 feet × 9 feet 1 inches (213.4 × 276.9 cm)

Purchased with funds contributed by Jane and Leonard Korman, 2007

2007-156-1

© Odili Donald Odita

Suggested Vocabulary

Abstract Conceptualism Geometric Modern Realism Surrealism
Contemporary Cubism Impressionism Perspective Ready-made

Lesson Specific Activity

This activity is designed to prepare students for thinking and talking about artworks they may see during a “Modern and Contemporary Art” lesson.

- Ask students to look around the room and observe what everyone is wearing. Are there differences between how girls and boys are dressed? What are the most popular colors? What fabrics are used? Are students’ clothes tight-fitting or loose? What hairstyles are popular?
- Discuss the factors that influence how students today dress and present themselves. For example, are they influenced by social media, popular culture, or their peers? Does their clothing reflect a desire to fit in or stand out? Do they feel completely free to dress the way they want, or do they feel constrained by rules or norms?
- If students wear uniforms to school, make this part of the conversation about rules and norms. Talk about what they would choose to wear if they didn’t have to wear uniforms. How do they express themselves even within the constraints of a uniform?
- Ask students to think of someone they consider a style icon. This could be someone they know personally or a celebrity. What do they admire about this person’s style? Is this someone who follows or challenges style norms?
- For homework, assign students to interview older adults about how they dressed when they were the students’ age. What was considered mainstream? What kind of clothing or hairstyle was popular? What was considered shocking to older generations? Students will document their interviews through photographs, drawings, other artifacts (like images from magazines), and text.
- Create a large timeline marked by decades, or periods of five years, and ask students to place documentation they collected at home on the timeline. Invite everyone to look at the images and compare the clothing and hairstyles of previous generations to those of today.
- Introduce the terms “modern” and “contemporary” in the context of your conversation. What was modern 20 years ago, or 40 years ago? What is modern today? How does breaking rules, or challenging mainstream ideas, cause fashion and style to change over time?
- Ask students to make predictions about what fashion items would belong on the timeline they have created in future years. Students can brainstorm ideas and draw out their items.

Extension Activity

- This activity could easily be modified or extended to include trends in music and entertainment, exercise and sports, food culture, politics, or anything else that is of interest to students.
- As an alternative to having students collect photographs and other artifacts from older adults, you may display images and show video of middle- or high-school students from previous eras.