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AMERICAN
ART

Understanding Abstract Art

Art Discovery Guide

family



understanding abstract art



Morton Livingston Schamberg

(1881-1918)

Figure

1913

Oil on canvas

Famous American artists like Arthur Dove, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Morton Livingston Schamberg created abstract art.

They were interested in capturing the essence of things in non-realistic ways.

Travel through the galleries and hang out in front of an abstract artwork.

Use these categories (color, line, and shape) to think about the works of art that seem more challenging to understand. Take turns with your family and friends asking questions about what you see.

tip!

Notice the titles of the artworks. They may offer a clue to understanding the work. Then, take a step back and look at the colors, lines, and shapes.

what is that?

Abstract art is a style of art in which the artist's goal is **not to make objects and people look exactly like they do** in real life.

Instead, the artist uses **color, line, and shape** as building blocks to create their own versions of objects, people, ideas, and feelings.

color

think

An artist's use of color can create a mood or suggest movement. Louise Nevelson chose a single color for her sculpture *Lunar Landscape*, while Stuart Davis used a bright color palette for *Bass Rocks No. 2*. Changing the colors in these works might change the feeling you experience when viewing the work.



primary colors
(red, yellow, blue)



secondary colors
(orange, green, purple)



warm colors



cool colors



Louise Nevelson
(1899–1988)
Lunar Landscape
1959–60
Painted wood



Stuart Davis
(1892–1964)
Bass Rocks No. 2
1964
Oil on canvas

ask

What colors did the artist use?
Why do you think he or she
used these specific colors?
(Remember, there are no right
or wrong answers.)

do

Use this list of emotions
to identify the feelings
you experience with each
artwork you see:

happy

tired

stressed

sad

angry

anxious

calm

sorrowful

energized

playful

line

think

Sometimes artists use lines to create action, insert details into shapes, and move the viewer's eyes across the artwork. Different lines create varied moods or feelings in a work of art. Straight lines may make an artwork feel still or quiet, curved lines might create a gentle mood, while zigzag lines could feel hectic or busy.

ask

When you're looking at an artwork, what do you see first? In what direction do your eyes travel?

do

Look for these different types of lines in the artworks you're viewing:

diagonal line



curved line



vertical line



thin line



horizontal line



thick line



short line



zigzag line



long line



Will Barnett
(1911–2012)
Self-Portrait
1952–53
Oil on canvas



shape

ask

What shapes do you see in this artwork? Are the shapes geometric like this,



or more organic, like this?



What might the other shapes symbolize?

think

Abstract artists often simplify forms (objects and people) down to basic shapes using a recognizable detail or two that allow you to identify the form. William Barnet's *Self-Portrait* is a good example. The upside-down question mark resembles a nose and eyes.

do

Now that you're a pro, use the back cover to draw your own abstract work of art. Let a family member, pet, or friend be your inspiration.



draw!

Use a pencil to create your own abstract work of art

One last question (and you don't have to decide right now): Do you like abstract art? Why or why not?

FIND A FAVORITE ARTWORK?
TAKE A PICTURE AND
SHARE IT USING #CARTERART

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