

MODULE THREE

Modern Portraits

The selected works allow for an examination of some of the ways modern painters have depicted others and themselves. In looking at these works, consider how each artist's style and his use of color, scale, and composition affects the figure he depicts. Also take into account the setting of the work and what information it conveys about the person represented or the artist himself.

Discussion Questions and Art-Historical Information



Pablo Picasso. *Les Femmes d'Alger*. 1907

- What is the first thing you notice when you look at this painting?
- How would you describe the faces of these women? How do they vary?
- The women in this painting are staring directly at the viewer. How does that make you feel?

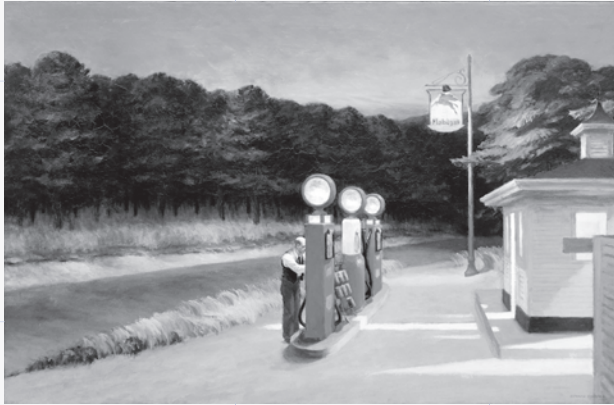
Rather than adhering to established conventions of composition and painting technique, Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) broke with traditional methods of representation. In this painting he distorted form, accentuated some details while leaving out others altogether, and presented multiple perspectives within the same work, instead of trying to faithfully re-create likenesses of the figures and the scene. In *Les Femmes d'Alger* Picasso represents five prostitutes posing. Avignon was a street in Barcelona famed for its brothels.



Andrew Wyeth. *Christina's World*. 1948

- What do you think is happening in this painting? Where is this woman and what is she doing?
- How would you describe this woman's posture and body language?
- If you could see this woman's face, what do you think her expression would be? Why?

Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009) was an American painter who spent most of his life living and painting in Maine and Pennsylvania. In Wyeth's style of painting, known as magic realism, commonplace scenes contain a sense of mystery and uncertainty. This painting depicts Christina Olson, the artist's neighbor in Maine, who had a neuromuscular disorder possibly caused by polio. Wyeth described Christina as "limited physically but by no means spiritually." Olson refused to use a wheelchair, preferring to crawl. Wyeth explained, "The challenge to me was to do justice to her extraordinary conquest of a life which most people would consider hopeless."



Edward Hopper. *Gas*. 1940

- During what time period do you think this painting is set?
- What region of the country might this scene depict?
- How do you think this figure is feeling? What is the overall mood of the painting?

Edward Hopper (1882–1967) studied commercial illustration and worked as an illustrator in New York. He spent his summers painting in New England. In most of Hopper's works, he highlights the mundane activities of the everyday in a realistic fashion. In paying attention to these quotidian tasks and often focusing on solitary figures, he imbued his paintings with a sense of loneliness and ambiguity and elevated the importance of each individual's intimate relationship with his or her surroundings.

TURN AND TALK: Create a narrative for this scene. What do you think has just happened at this gas station? What could happen next?



Jeff Wall. *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*. 1999–2000

- What is this figure doing? What might his posture reveal about his emotional state?
- How would you describe this environment? What does it convey about this man's life?
- Why do you think he is living in this place?

Jeff Wall (born 1946) is a contemporary photographer from Canada. *After "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue* references a literary work: Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. In the novel's prologue, Ellison introduces the protagonist and narrator, who is never named, in his underground home. In Wall's rendition he presents this man from an angle that denies us a view of his face. Instead, he uses the figure's surroundings to help the viewer establish his identity and his place within American society.

TURN AND TALK: Discuss your favorite story or book. Is there a character you identify with or a particular part you find most poignant? Why is it so meaningful to you?



Vincent van Gogh. *The Starry Night*. 1889

- What is the first word that comes to your mind when you look at this painting?
- How would you describe this place?
- How can we think of this work as a type of self-portrait?

In 1888 Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) went to Provence, where he found the brilliant light and vivid colors of the nighttime intoxicating. He remarked, “It often seems to me that the night is much more alive and richly colored than the day.” Even though this is a night scene, the colors are extremely bright and intense. While this scene was inspired by the view from Van Gogh’s mental institution in Saint-Rémy, the village depicted was partly invented, perhaps based on memories of his native Holland. Thus the painting is derived from actual observation but also from Van Gogh’s imagination and memories. Van Gogh championed individual expression over absolute realism. In *Starry Night* he offers a glimpse into his personal history as well as insight into his thoughts and imagination.

Art-Making Activity

In this module, we considered how different artists have represented themselves and others. Ask participants to work in pairs to make collage portraits of one another. Use colored poster board as a background and decorative papers of various colors, patterns, and textures for the collage. Ask participants to look at the overall shape or outline of their partner’s head. Suggest they sketch a light pencil line of that shape on their poster board to guide them. They can then start cutting, tearing, and gluing paper to fill in the outline of the portrait. You can also provide pre-cut pieces of paper. Next, instruct them to move on to the details. These can include hair, ears, neck, glasses, jewelry, or clothing. Tell them they can use different textures and colors of materials to describe the various surfaces they see and that the portrait need not be realistic.