

MODULE SEVEN

Modern Visions of Light

The selected works explore different ways that artists have incorporated the theme or image of light into their practice. Included are a photograph and four paintings: two mediums whose relationship with light is essential. When discussing these works take note of where light is seen and how it affects the viewer's perception of the place that is depicted. Also consider the effect of the absence of light in some of the works.

Discussion Questions and Art-Historical Information



René Magritte. *The Empire of Light, II*. 1950

- What are some words that you would use to describe this scene?
- What time of day would you say is depicted in this painting? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Why do you think Magritte has included elements of both night and day here?

As one of the most important Surrealists, René Magritte (1898–1967) often painted scenes filled with ambiguity. This image is one of a series in which Magritte presented the same street scene simultaneously during the day and at nighttime. In his adherence to this illusionist technique, Magritte’s aesthetic was similar to that of his fellow Surrealist Salvador Dalí, who referred to this style as “hand-painted dream photographs.”



Jacob August Riis. *Bandits' Roost, 59 1/2 Mulberry Street*. 1888

- Who are the people in this photograph and where are they?
- Photography literally means “writing with light.” What are the different ways that light is present and absent in this work?
- What are the differences between photography and painting? What possibilities does photography offer for depicting certain scenes?

Jacob August Riis (1849–1914) was an early proponent of the documentary potential of photography. He used his camera to capture the climate and conditions of the slums of New York City in an effort to promote social change. After the advent of the flash, Riis began photographing tenements and other overcrowded urban areas at night, casting a harsh light on the poor living conditions of his subjects. *Bandits' Roost, 59 1/2 Mulberry Street* represents a notorious spot in downtown Manhattan. Riis began photographing this street as a police reporter for *The Tribune* in 1878. From then on, this street and its surroundings would remain an important subject in his work.

TURN AND TALK: If you were to photograph certain parts of your hometown, which would you choose and why? How would your depictions differ based on the time of day?



Jacob Lawrence. *Street Shadows*. 1959

- Where does this scene take place? Can you determine the time of day or the season?
- How does Lawrence depict light and shadows?
- What title would you give to this work? Once you learn the actual title, does it change your perception of the work?

Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) is one of the most celebrated African American artists to date. While living in New York, he studied at the Art Students League and at Studio 306 in Harlem and worked under the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Although abstract paintings were in vogue at the time, Lawrence maintained a dedication to creating representational paintings. In *Street Shadows*, Lawrence depicts a busy urban block. The scene is filled with stylized figures and buildings as well as planes of light and shadow.



Paul Cézanne. *L'Estaque*. 1879–83

- What natural and man-made elements do you see in this painting?
- Where can you see light in this scene?
- What is the emotional impact of the painting?

Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) is often called the father of modern art. He used conventional content, such as landscape, still life, and portraiture, to deepen his explorations of form and perception and to question the traditions of painting. In this painting he applied large patches of different hues, laid on with wide brushstrokes that sweep rhythmically across the surface. No drawn contours bound the shapes of the houses, trees, or rocks. Rather, the play of light and shadow creates a sense of three-dimensionality. *L'Estaque* is one of many landscapes Cézanne created in the south of France, where he was able to paint numerous landscapes from a variety of viewpoints and angles, further investigating ideas of our visual relationship to our surroundings.

Art-Making Activity



Edward Hopper. *New York Movie*. 1939

- What space do you think this painting depicts? How does this theater look different than current movie theaters?
- What is the woman in blue doing? How do you think she is feeling?
- What are the different ways that lighting plays a role in this painting? Where can it be seen? What kind of mood does it create?

Paintings by Edward Hopper (1882–1967) are often realistic, but also often full of ambiguity. Feelings of loneliness and isolation pervade his paintings, particularly his later works, which typically contain one solitary figure or, at times, a few figures that do not interact. Through the use of strong, shadow-casting light, he emphasizes mood and illuminates the scene. Personal and emotive, his works are charged with narrative potential.

TURN AND TALK: Discuss the woman standing to the side. Why is she not watching the film? What might she be thinking about? What will she do once the movie ends?

In this module, we considered different ways artists have explored the effects of light on certain settings and how we perceive them. In this activity, have participants consider how daylight affects a certain place that they know well. Ask participants to think of a specific place from their past or present. Give them paint, pastels, or paper — any medium that allows for extensive use of color. Ask them to depict this place during the day. When they are done, ask them to consider the exact same place at night — and to illustrate it on a separate piece of paper. Lead a discussion to compare and contrast the two renditions: How do they differ? How has the lighting changed? Has a new tone or mood been created?