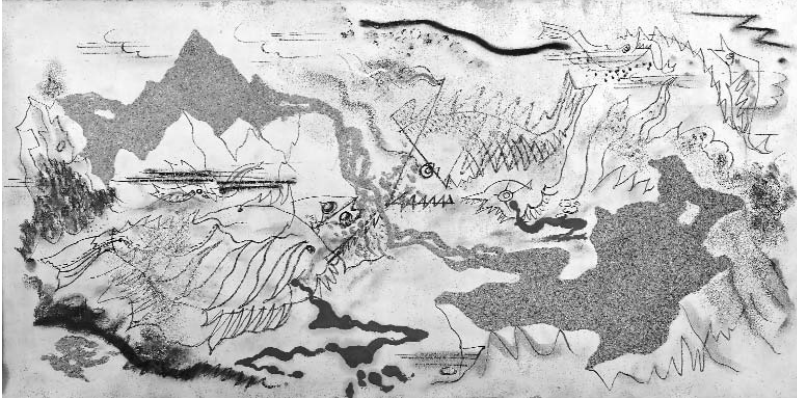


## LESSON FOUR: Modern Landscapes



**IMAGE THIRTEEN:** André Masson. French, 1896–1987. *Battle of Fishes*. 1926. Sand, gesso, oil, pencil, and charcoal on canvas, 14 ¼ x 28 ¾" (36.2 x 73 cm). Purchase. © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris



**IMAGE FOURTEEN:** Otto Dix. German, 1891–1969. *bei Langemarck (Februar 1918) (Near Langemarck [February 1918])* from *Der Krieg (The War)*. 1924. Etching and drypoint from a portfolio of fifty etchings some with aquatint and drypoint, plate: 9 ⅞ x 11 ½" (24 x 29.2 cm); sheet: 13 ¾ x 18 ½" (35 x 47 cm). Publisher: Karl Nierendorf, Berlin. Printer: Otto Felsing, Charlottenburg. Edition: 70. Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. ©2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn



**IMAGE FIFTEEN:** Charles Sheeler. American, 1883–1965. *American Landscape*. 1930. Oil on canvas, 24 x 31" (61 x 78.8 cm). Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller

## INTRODUCTION

During the interwar period, the European and American **landscape** was transformed by several factors, including the lingering ravages of war (in Europe) and the increased industrialization of rural and urban areas. Industrialization created an increased sense of individualism and isolation in urban centers and contributed to increasingly urbanized landscapes. Artists made photographs, prints, paintings, and drawings that documented the impact of war on the land and the industrialization of the landscape throughout North America and Europe. The works in this lesson reflect several artistic responses to the changing landscape during the interwar period.

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will discuss the ways paintings and prints created during the interwar years reflect changes to the landscape.
- Students will visually analyze landscape images, using such terms as **background, foreground, middle ground, medium, and composition**.
- Students will consider the different ways artists responded to the changing landscape.

## INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Allow your students a few minutes to closely examine the image of *Battle of Fishes*, by André Masson (Image Thirteen), without telling them the title.
- Ask your students to describe what they see in this image, paying particular attention to the artist's choice of materials, colors, and subject matter.
- Ask your students to describe the arrangement of this landscape. Can this landscape be discussed in the conventional terms of foreground, middle ground, and background?

Inform your students that Masson created this painting in 1926, when he was a member of the Surrealist movement. Masson was particularly interested in a facet of Surrealism known as **automatism**, in which artists created artworks without conscious thought or intention. For Masson, this was achieved through automatic drawing. He would begin by putting a pencil to a piece of paper without any specific subject in mind, and allow his hand to move freely, believing that in doing so he was tapping into his subconscious thoughts. Only after a significant number of lines were made would he allow himself to develop images. However, he found it difficult to achieve automatism in his paintings, and in 1926 he began to apply paint directly from the paint tube and use glue and sand.

- Ask your students to brainstorm what techniques and materials they think Masson may have used to create this artwork, giving examples from the painting.
- Inform your students that the title of this painting is *Battle of Fishes*. Ask your students if the title seems appropriate.
- Ask your students to imagine that they had the opportunity to rename Masson's painting. What title would they give this work? Ask them to explain their reasons based on visual examples from the image.

### IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

Inform your students that Masson fought in World War I and suffered a serious injury that left him emotionally unstable. Masson recounted the effects of his time injured on the battlefield:

The indescribable night of the battlefield, streaked in every direction by bright red and green rockets, striped by the wake and the flashes of the projectiles and rockets—all this fairy-tale-like entrenchment was orchestrated by the explosions of shells which literally encircled me with earth and shrapnel. To see all that, face upward, one's body immobilized on a stretcher, instead of head down as in the fighting where one burrows like a dog in the shell craters, constituted a rare and unwonted situation.<sup>13</sup>

- **Inform your students that many people believe that these and other wartime experiences emerge in Masson's automatic drawings. Ask your students if there is any evidence in this painting that Masson's wartime experiences influenced his artistic practice. Ask your students to support their responses with examples from the painting.**
- **Have your students create two-minute automatic drawings. Then have them spend another two minutes transforming their webs of lines into scenes. Have them share their final images with the entire group and discuss the types of scenes that they created. Do they agree that meanings can emerge from such drawings?**
- **Show your students the image of Otto Dix's print *bei Langemarck (Februar 1918)* (*Near Langemarck [February 1918]*) from *Der Krieg (The War)* (Image Fourteen).**
- **Ask your students what they think the print depicts, making sure that they support their interpretations with visual evidence from the image.**
- **Ask your students to compare and contrast this image with *Battle of Fishes*.**

Inform your students that Dix was a German artist and a volunteer machine-gunner in World War I. During his time in the war, Dix witnessed much fighting, including trench warfare, and documented these experiences in over six hundred drawings. This print, *Near Langemarck (February 1918)*, is part of a graphic series titled *The War*, created by Dix six years after the war ended. The series consists of fifty etchings in which the artist employed a realistic style to depict images of the war. To create the series, Dix drew on such resources as anatomy classes, visits to his local morgue, his wartime drawings, and many newspaper photographs documenting the horrors of the war.

- **Ask your students whether this information reinforces or changes their initial interpretations of Dix's work.**
- **Ask your students to comment on the type of message the image communicates about the war. Do you think the artist wanted to create an image that celebrated war or was critical of it? Ask your students to explain their responses in terms of the image.**
- **Read your students the following quote by the artist. After reading the quote, ask them to share their thoughts.**

War is something animal-like: hunger, lice, slime, these crazy sounds. . . . War was something horrible, but nonetheless something powerful. . . . Under no circumstances could I miss it! It is necessary to see people in this unchained condition in order to know something about man.<sup>14</sup>

13. André Masson, quoted in William Rubin and Carolyn Lanchner, *André Masson* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976), 30.

14. Otto Dix, quoted in *Otto Dix, 1891–1969* (Munich: Museum Villa Stuck, 1985), 280.

- Compare Dix's reaction to war with Masson's, as evidenced in their work.

Inform your students that the next image they will see is called *American Landscape*. Have the class brainstorm what they think a painting with this title might depict. Encourage your students to consider how an image with this title made today would differ from a painting with the same title that was made in the 1930s.

- Show your students the image of *American Landscape*, by Charles Sheeler (Image Fifteen). Ask them how it relates to what they imagined a work with this title would depict.
- Ask your students to briefly compare and contrast the landscape depicted in this work with the landscape in *Battle of Fishes*, paying particular attention to the composition, lines, materials, and scene.

Tell your students that Sheeler painted *American Landscape* in 1938 when he was commissioned by Ford Motors to document the River Rouge Plant, a new Ford Model T production plant outside Detroit. Sheeler visited the plant for six weeks, documenting it through thirty-two official photographs that were subsequently printed in *Vanity Fair*, *Time*, and other magazines. He often used photographs as source material for paintings, including *American Landscape*. The realistic style he painted in came to be known as **Precisionism**. Of his work, Sheeler said,

My interest in photography, paralleling that in painting, has been based on admirations for its possibility of accounting for the visual world with an exactitude not equaled by any other medium. The difference in the manner of arrival at their destination—the painting being the result of a composite image and the photograph being a single image—prevents these media from being competitive.<sup>15</sup>

- Ask your students how *American Landscape* differs from a photograph. What elements might you expect to see in a photograph of this scene that are not present in this image?

To Sheeler, industry was an important subject for contemporary art:

Every age manifests the nature of its content by some external form of evidence. In a period such as ours, when only a few isolated individuals give evidence of religious content, some form other than that of the Gothic Cathedral must be found for our authentic expression. Since industry predominantly concerns the greatest number, finding an expression for it concerns the artist.<sup>16</sup>

Ask your students how they think the artist felt about the increasing industrialization of the American landscape, given this quote and the visual evidence of the painting.

- Ask your students if they can find a human figure in this image. Students may notice the one very small figure in the foreground of the image, on the railway tracks. Ask your students how their interpretation of this image would change if there were a greater number of people depicted, keeping in mind the work's composition and mood.
- How does Sheeler's response to the environment differ from Masson's or Dix's in terms of style?

15. Charles Sheeler, quoted in Mary Jane Jacob and Linda Downs, *The Rouge: The Image of Industry in the Art of Charles Sheeler and Diego Rivera* (Detroit: Detroit Institute of Art, 1978), 12.

16. *Ibid.*, 11.

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. Create a Postcard

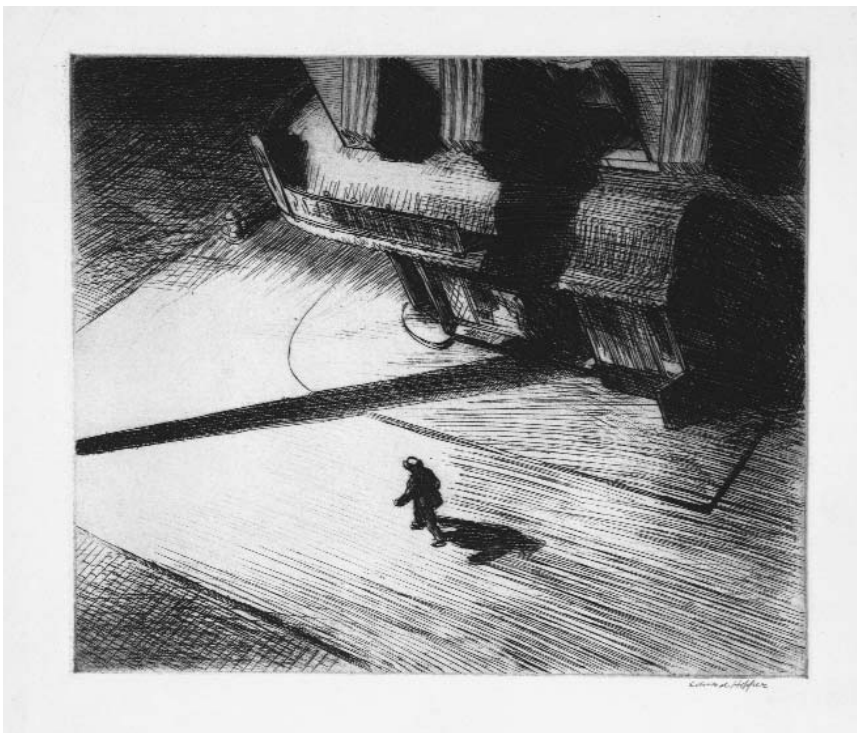
Display all three images from this lesson. Give each student a sheet of paper. Ask your students to choose one artwork and imagine that they are visiting the place in the image. Have each student write an imaginary postcard from that place, telling a friend or relative what it is like, what happens there, how it feels, and if they are having a good time. Have each student give his or her completed postcard to the person at the next desk. Ask each student to guess which painting the postcard is about.

### 2. Research another artist

Painter Diego Rivera, part of the **Mexican Muralist movement**, also created images of the Ford Motor River Rouge Plant. Have your students research the artwork Rivera created in response to the industrial landscape of North America. As a class, discuss how the two artists' responses differed and were similar.

### 3. Write a Scenario

Show your students Edward Hopper's print *Night Shadows* (Image Sixteen). Ask each student to write down several words to describe the mood of this image. Hopper was often interested in capturing the fleeting moment in his artworks, as he has in *Night Shadows*. Ask your students to imagine what would happen next in the scene if the image were to come to life. Have each student write a scenario for the image that would come after *Night Shadows*, using and adding to the words they initially wrote down to express the mood of the print. Have each student create an image that visually expresses their written descriptions. Create a classroom exhibit of the students' visual and written responses, and encourage students to take note of the differences among their responses to the image.



**IMAGE SIXTEEN:** Edward Hopper. American, 1882–1967. *Night Shadows* from *Six American Etchings*. 1921, published 1924. Etching from a portfolio by various artists, plate: 6  $\frac{1}{16}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{8}$ " (17.6 x 20.7 cm); sheet: 9  $\frac{7}{16}$  x 11  $\frac{1}{4}$ " (24 x 28.6 cm). Publisher: The New Republic, New York. Printer: Peter Platt, New York. Edition: approximately 500. Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller