

LESSON THREE: Action/Reaction: Art and Politics



IMAGE TEN: Fernand Léger. French, 1881–1955. *Three Women*. 1921. Oil on canvas, 6' $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 8' 3" (183.5 x 251.5 cm). Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund. © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris



IMAGE ELEVEN: David Alfaro Siqueiros. Mexican, 1896–1974. *Echo of a Scream*. 1937. Enamel on wood, 48 x 36" (121.9 x 91.4 cm). Gift of Edward M. M. Warburg. © 2007 David Alfaro Siqueiros/Artist's Rights Society (ARS), New York/SOMAAP, Mexico



IMAGE TWELVE: Aleksandr Rodchenko. Russian, 1891–1956. *Assembling for a Demonstration*. 1928–30. Gelatin silver print, 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 13 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (49.5 x 35.3 cm). Mr. and Mrs. John Spencer Fund

INTRODUCTION

Following the outbreak of World War I, avant-garde artistic practices that had been developed to challenge traditional means of representation (Cubism, for example) lost their resonance with many artists, who felt that their abstract fissures and voids were too removed from current political and social realities. A number of artists, including Pablo Picasso and Fernand Léger, rejected Cubism and sought a more suitable means of representing the world around them. This lesson takes as its focus works of art that were created by artists in direct response to the war and to social turmoil in their environments and in the world.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will examine three images that represent different ways that artists, in the years between World War I and World War II, responded to the social and political turmoil around them.
- Students will discuss these images in terms of subject matter, **composition**, **style**, and **representation**.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Ask students to brainstorm ways artists can react against and/or respond to the social and political times they live in. Create a list of their responses on the board.
- Ask students if they have ever created a response to the wars or social turmoil of their times in their artwork. Ask them what decisions they made or might have to make. Where did they get their ideas and their information about the issue? What medium did they choose to represent their ideas?

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Ask your students to take a minute to look closely at the image of Fernand Léger's painting *Three Women* (Image Ten). Ask your students to write down five words they immediately think of when they look at this work.
- Ask each student to tell the class one of the words they wrote down and to explain briefly why they chose that word based on what they see.
- Ask students to describe in greater detail the figures, objects, and background in *Three Women*. What are some of the stylistic choices that Léger made in creating this image? Students should support their ideas with evidence from the image.

Inform your students that prior to World War I, Léger was a leading Cubist painter. He created images of cities, people, and objects that were fractured into geometric shapes and juxtapositions of bright colors. *Three Women* represents a dramatic shift in Léger's artistic style. It is thought that this shift was a direct result of the artist's experiences in World War I, between 1914 and 1918. In the postwar years Léger looked to Classical art to inform a style of modern art that would be suitable for a new, more stable, machine age that would replace the "mechanical period" of World War I. Léger said of this shift, "I had broken down the human body, so I set about putting it together again and rediscovering the human face. . . . I wanted a rest, a breathing space. After the dynamism of the mechanical period, I felt a need for the staticity of large figures."⁸

8. Fernand Léger, quoted in Carolyn Lanchner, *Fernand Léger* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 188.

- Ask students to discuss, in terms of the imagery in the painting, Léger's use of the word "staticity" to describe the figures in *Three Women*.
- Before the war, Léger was very interested in abstraction in his painting. Ask your students to define the term "abstraction." Ask them whether they consider any elements of this painting to be abstract.

Inform your students that Léger's new style of painting in the postwar years came to be known as "a return to order" (*rappel à l'ordre*). Léger and other artists began to revisit art history and paint Classical or traditional subjects, such as nude female figures, still lifes, and portraits. For instance, for this image Léger chose the Classical subject of a reclining nude in a domestic setting. However, rather than reverting to a Classical style, Léger sought to represent traditional subjects with a modern, mechanized visual language. "The contemporary environment is clearly the manufactured and 'mechanical' object: this is slowly subjugating the breasts and curves of woman, fruit, the soft landscape—inspiration of painters since art began, he said."⁹

- Ask your students whether they consider the subject of this image to be a traditional or modern scene. Have your students support their answers with visual evidence.
- As a class, refer back to the students' lists of their five initial responses to this image. Are there any words that they would add to their lists after having looked at the work in more detail?
- Show your students the image of *Echo of a Scream*, by David Alfaro Siqueiros (Image Eleven). Ask your students to compare the imagery in this painting to Léger's *Three Women*, paying particular attention to the composition of the image, the depiction of figures, and the setting.
- Inform your students that Siqueiros, one of the leading Mexican Muralists, was a very politically motivated artist. He said of this painting, "It is a call to all human beings so that they may end all wars."¹⁰ Ask your students to comment on the artist's statement. How does this statement relate to the visual evidence in the image? Do they think the artist was successful in achieving what he wished to in this painting?
- Based on a visual comparison of *Three Women* and *Echo of a Scream*, ask your students for their initial ideas about how Siqueiros's reactions to his political and social times differed from Léger's.
- In *Three Women* Léger wanted to re-create Classical or traditional subjects of art history for the modern machine age, through a new visual language. Siqueiros also included machine imagery in his painting. Ask your students how the artists' use of the machine in their imagery differs and how their views on a postwar machine age may have differed. Do they think Léger and Siqueiros would have agreed or disagreed?

Create a list on the board to describe some of the differences and similarities between the experiences of creating and viewing photographs and paintings. Keep this list on the board as you move through the discussion of *Assembling for a Demonstration*, and refer to it when appropriate.

- Show your students the image of *Assembling for a Demonstration*, by Aleksandr Rodchenko (Image Twelve). Do not tell them the title.

9. Ibid., 190.

10. This quotation comes from the Artist Questionnaire Siqueiros filled out, in 1970, for the Department of Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art.

- Ask your students to describe the scene in the photograph. Where is the artist in relation to the scene?
- What is the action that Rodchenko captured in this image?

Inform your students that Rodchenko was a Russian artist who, following the October Revolution of 1917, became a member of the Communist Party. Of his and fellow artists' political involvement, Rodchenko said, "We were for the new world, the world of industry, technology and science. We were for the new man; we felt him but did not imagine him clearly. . . . We created a new understanding of beauty, and enlarged the concept of art."¹¹ Rodchenko's art became increasingly political in its motivations and varied in its use of mediums. In 1921, he gave up painting, as he considered it to be too deeply rooted in the bourgeois society that he rejected. Instead, he explored the mediums of printmaking, film, collage, photomontage, and photography, all of which he considered to be more accessible to a broader public.

- Tell your students that Rodchenko titled this photograph *Assembling for a Demonstration*. Ask them if knowing the title changes their idea about what is depicted in this photograph.

Speaking of photography, Rodchenko said,

The modern city with its multistory buildings, the specially designed factories and plants, the two- and three-story windows, the streetcars, automobiles, illuminated signs and billboards, oceanliners, airplanes . . . have redirected (only a little, its true) the normal psychology of visual perception. It would seem that only the camera is capable of reflecting contemporary life.¹²

- Tell your students that Rodchenko was very interested in photography's ability to capture the real world through different vantage points, or points of view. Ask your students to identify where the artist was when he took this photograph. Tell your students that this type of photograph uses an aerial perspective and was popularized during the war as photographers began to take pictures from airplanes.
- How does Rodchenko's vantage point affect the composition and mood of this photograph?
- Léger, Rodchenko, and Siqueiros either reacted against or responded to contemporary social and political times in their artworks. Ask your students to discuss these works in terms of similarities and differences of approach.

ACTIVITIES

1. Create a Word Poem

Ask your students to each choose one word that they added to their word bank over the course of the lesson and write that word on a piece of white card. Divide your students into groups of six and ask them to share their cards with their groups. Have each group choose one of the artworks from this lesson and, assembling their words together, create a poem that is a response to or reaction against their chosen work. Ask each group to share their poem with the class.

11. Aleksandr Rodchenko, quoted in Magdalena Dabrowski, "Aleksandr Rodchenko: Innovation and Experiment," in Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi, *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 23–24.

12. Aleksandr Rodchenko, quoted in Peter Galassi, "Rodchenko and Photography's Revolution," in Dabrowski, Dickerman, and Galassi, *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, 122.

2. Collage a Background

It is known that Siqueiros looked to photographic source material to create the image of the child in *Echo of a Scream*, although it is disputed whether the artist's source was a child screaming in a newspaper image of the Spanish Civil War that was reproduced in a newsreel or a photograph of a Kenyan woman in a 1925 *National Geographic* magazine. Have your students choose one image from a contemporary newspaper that they feel speaks to their own political and social times. Have your students create a new background for the image, as Siqueiros did with the image of the child in *Echo of a Scream*. Have your students display their collages and provide brief explanations for their artistic choices.

3. Create Your Own Political Artwork

Léger, Siqueiros, and Rodchenko responded to the wars and social turmoil of their times. Have your students create responses to their own times. Students can refer to source material such as newspaper and magazine imagery and artworks that inspire them. Revisit this lesson's introductory conversation regarding the decisions students made or might have to make in creating art that responds to current issues.