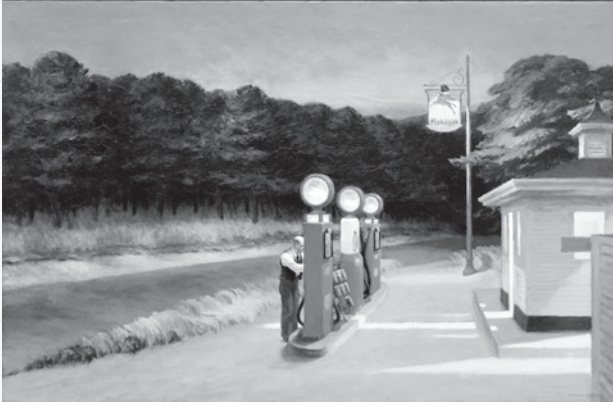


MODULE TWO

Images of America

The selected works offer glimpses of life in the United States during the twentieth century. The images include scenes created by artists from different countries and offer a range of interpretations of both urban and rural life. The chronological sequence allows for a discussion of the important changes that were occurring not only in American history but also in the development of art. Throughout the discussion, consider how American culture and identity are defined and represented in visual art.

Discussion Questions and Art-Historical Information



Edward Hopper. *Gas*. 1940

- Is there anything in this painting that strikes you as distinctly “American”? Why or why not?
- What elements of the landscape are familiar to you, if any?
- If this painting were to depict a present-day gas station, how would it differ from the one seen here?

Edward Hopper (1882–1967) studied illustration and painting at the New York Institute of Art and Design, where he and his fellow students were encouraged to create realistic depictions of modern life. Because abstraction reigned supreme then, many critics considered Hopper and his colleagues to be painting in a style that was all but obsolete. Eventually, though, his work came to be considered an important precursor to a generation of Pop artists and Photo-Realist painters. Most of Hopper’s paintings concentrate on the subtle interactions of human beings with each other and/or their surroundings.

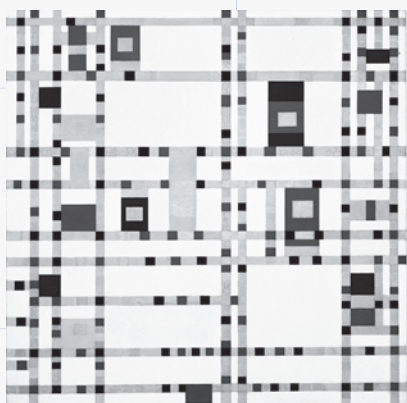


Jacob Lawrence. *In the North the Negro had better educational facilities*. 1940–41

- Who are the figures in this painting? Where do you think they are?
- Consider the title of this work. Do you think this work depicts educational facilities in the North or the South? Why?
- Have you or your family ever moved to another region, and, if so, what were the motivations for the move?

Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) is among the best-known twentieth-century American artists. Throughout his lengthy artistic career, Lawrence concentrated on depicting the history and struggles of African Americans, and his work often portrays important periods in African American history. Lawrence was only twenty-three when he completed the sixty-panel series of paintings originally entitled *Migration of the Negro*. This series depicts the Great Migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North, of which Lawrence’s parents were a part. The paintings were shown in New York and brought him national recognition after they were featured in a 1941 issue of *Fortune* magazine.

TURN AND TALK: Discuss your own educational experience. What was your early schooling like? How do you think your opportunities and experiences compare to those of children today?



Piet Mondrian. *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. 1942–43

- What shapes and colors do you see in this painting? Why do you suppose the artist exclusively uses straight lines and primary colors?
- If this image represented a place, where might it be? Would it be urban or rural?
- Mondrian titled this work *Broadway Boogie Woogie*. What does “boogie woogie” mean to you? How does knowing the title affect the way you look at the work?

Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) made art intimately related to his spiritual and philosophical studies. In his work he sought to transcend specific subject matter to represent the universal. Over the course of the development of his aesthetic doctrine, called Neo-Plasticism, he gradually limited his compositions to what he considered “pure” forms—horizontal and vertical lines—resulting in a strict rectilinearity and a palette of black, white, and primary colors exclusively. In 1940 Mondrian moved to New York City, where he would remain until his death. He took great interest in city life and jazz music, to which he was introduced in New York, and he soon began, as he said, “to put a little boogie-woogie” into his paintings.



Andrew Wyeth. *Christina's World*. 1948

- Why do you think this figure is in the field? What might she be looking at?
- What part of America does this painting depict?
- What is the overall tone of this work?

Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009) was an American painter. He often depicted the land and inhabitants around his hometown of Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, and those near his summer home in Cushing, Maine. As a representational artist, Wyeth's paintings sharply contrasted with abstraction, which gained currency in American art in the mid-twentieth century. Wyeth vividly recorded arid landscapes and rural houses and shacks, painting minute details and nuances of light and shadow. Wyeth's paintings often contain strong emotional currents and symbolic content. There is great mystery in *Christina's World*, and the ambiguities associated with the woman and the scene allow the viewer to form multiple narratives.

TURN AND TALK: Create a narrative for this scene. Consider the main figure. Why is she in this field? What is she about to do?



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

- What kind of place is represented in this photograph? How would you describe it?
- Is this a real room? Do you think Wall found this place, or constructed it?
- What time period do you think this photograph suggests?

Jeff Wall (born 1946) is a contemporary artist living and working in Canada whose medium of choice is photography. This photograph, *After “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison, the Prologue*, is a reference to the famous American novel that tells the story of one unnamed African American’s struggle to be recognized by white society around the time of World War II. In this visual rendition Wall stays true to the time period in which the novel is set. The scene was imagined and created by the artist with the help of assistants, and incorporates many details from the novel, including 1,369 light bulbs: the exact number cited in Ellison’s prologue.

Art-Making Activity

In this module, we looked at various representations of American life in the twentieth century. Ask participants to create a collaged image that represents America to them. Suggest that their image can depict the America of today or represent some time in the past. Provide newspapers and magazines in which participants may find the images for their collages. At the end, have participants share their collages with the rest of the group.