

LESSON THREE: Artists' Journeys



IMAGE NINE: Paul Gauguin. French, 1848–1903. *Noa Noa (Fragrance)* from *Noa Noa*. 1893–94. One from a series of ten woodcuts. Woodcut on endgrain boxwood, printed in color with stencils. Composition: 14 x 8 1/16" (35.5 x 20.5 cm); sheet: 15 1/2 x 9 3/8" (39.3 x 24.4 cm). Publisher: the artist, Paris. Printer: Louis Ray, Paris. Edition: 25–30. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Lillie P. Bliss Collection



IMAGE TEN: Henri Matisse. French, 1869–1954. *Study for "Luxe, calme et volupté."* 1905. Oil on canvas, 12 7/8 x 16" (32.7 x 40.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. John Hay Whitney Bequest. © 2005 Succession H. Matisse, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



IMAGE ELEVEN: Henri Matisse. French, 1869–1954. *Landscape at Collioure*. 1905. Oil on canvas, 15 1/4 x 18 3/8" (38.8 x 46.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift and Bequest of Louise Reinhardt Smith. © 2005 Succession H. Matisse, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



IMAGE TWELVE: Vasily Kandinsky. French, born Russia, 1866–1944. *Picture with an Archer*. 1909. Oil on canvas, 68 7/8 x 57 3/8" (175 x 144.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift and Bequest of Louise Reinhardt Smith. © 2005 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris

INTRODUCTION

Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artists often took advantage of innovations in transportation by traveling to exotic or rural locations. Driven in part by their dissatisfaction with the modern city, many artists sought out places resembling untouched earthly paradises. In these areas, away from the bustle of the modern city, artists were able to focus on their work and observe nature firsthand; because of this, many radical artistic experiments occurred in the most rural and least "modern" of settings.

Escaping from the urban environment had an effect on certain artists' work. In order to evoke the sensation of being in a harmonious, warm, and tranquil coastal setting, for example, Matisse experimented with vibrant colors and sketchy brushwork that was suitable for the setting in which he painted. Similarly, the Russian artist Vasily Kandinsky, working in the quiet rural setting of Murnau, away from his home in the bustling city of Munich, experimented with colors and subject matter that reflected the unspoiled rural environment.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will analyze modern artists' interest in travel.
- Students will discuss modern artists' radical and unusual use of artistic materials.
- Students will look at the ways in which modern artists were inspired by unusual artistic sources.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

Give your students a moment to look at *Noa Noa (Fragrance)* (Image Nine). Then begin the discussion by asking them to describe what they see in this work. Ask them who they think the figures might be and what they might be doing.

- Ask your students to look closely at the medium that the artist used. Ask them how they would describe it, using five adjectives. (For more information on the processes of printmaking, see www.moma.org/exhibitions/2001/whatisaprint.)

In 1891, disgusted by what he saw as a corrupt and decadent bourgeois culture in Paris, the French artist Paul Gauguin decided to seek an unspoiled, simpler society. Abandoning his family, friends, and artistic career in Paris, he went on a voyage to Tahiti, in French Polynesia, a journey of over 9,500 miles. After returning to Paris, in 1893, Gauguin created the *Noa Noa* woodcuts (Tahitian for "fragrance"), which he had intended to print in book form alongside poems to explain his reasons for traveling to Tahiti. The book, however, was not published in France until Gauguin's return to Tahiti, in 1901.

- Ask your students what clues about Gauguin's experience of Tahiti they pick up from this image?
- Ask how they think Gauguin evoked the idea of "fragrance" in this work. Make sure they give examples to back up their ideas.
- Have your students compare and contrast Matisse's *Study for "Luxe, calme et volupté"* (Image Ten) with Gauguin's print *Noa Noa*. Ask them to describe the main similarities and differences.

Henri Matisse painted this work, an oil sketch for a larger work, in the small fishing village of Saint-Tropez, in the south of France, where he and his family were on holiday with the painter Paul Signac. One day, after an argument with Signac, Matisse, his wife Amélie, and their son Pierre went for a walk, during which Matisse painted an earlier version of this study. In that version, only Amélie and Pierre are visible, sitting by the edge of the sea; in this version, Matisse has added not only a picnic blanket and food, but also a boat and nude women drying themselves after a swim.

The title for this work, *Luxe, calme et volupté* (Richness, calm, and pleasure), was inspired by a poem by the French poet Charles Baudelaire, called *Invitation to the Voyage*:

My child, my sister, dream
 How sweet all things would seem
 Were we in that kind land to live together,
 And there love slow and long,
 There love and die among
 Those scenes that image you, that sumptuous weather.
 Drowned suns that glimmer there
 Through cloud-disheveled air
 Move me with such a mystery as appears
 Within those other skies
 Of your treacherous eyes
 When I behold them shining through their tears.

There, there is nothing else but grace and measure,
 Richness, calm and pleasure.

Furniture that wears
 The luster of the years
 Softly would glow within our glowing chamber.
 Flowers of rarest bloom
 Proffering their perfume
 Mixed with the vague fragrances of amber;
 Gold ceilings would there be,
 Mirrors deep as the sea,
 The walls all in an Eastern splendor hung—
 Nothing but should address
 The soul's loneliness,
 Speaking her sweet and secret native tongue.

There, there is nothing else but grace and measure,
 Richness, calm and pleasure.

See, sheltered from the swells
 There in the still canals
 Those drowsy ships that dream of sailing forth;
 It is to satisfy
 Your least desire, they ply
 Hither through all the waters of the earth.
 —The sun at close of day
 Clothes the fields of hay,

Then the canals, at last the town entire
 In hyacinth and gold:
 Slowly the land is rolled
 Sleepward under a sea of gentle fire.

There, there is nothing else but grace and measure,
 Richness, calm and pleasure.¹²

- Ask your students how they think Matisse attempted to create “richness,” “calm,” and “pleasure” in his painting. Ask for examples that support their ideas.
- Ask them how Matisse’s use of color creates an atmosphere. Ask if they think the atmosphere Matisse conjured with color is like the atmosphere Baudelaire created with words.

When Matisse painted this work, the South of France was a popular tourist destination. The new railways from Paris to the South made travel quick and easy. For artists, the distinctively brilliant light of the South and the opportunity to paint outdoors were especially tempting. Like Gauguin, Matisse and some of his contemporaries sought out locations untouched by the modern world, valuing unspoiled landscapes in the same way regular city-dwelling vacationers did.

- Ask your students how knowing this information about the new railways affects their ideas about the painting.
- Ask your students to consider Baudelaire’s poem. Ask them how they think Matisse created a sense of environment in *Study for “Luxe, calme et volupté.”*
- Ask your students to compare and contrast Matisse’s *Study for “Luxe, calme et volupté”* with *Landscape at Collioure* (Image Eleven), also by Matisse. Ask what they think changed in the way the artist used paint to describe a scene. Ask why they think this might be.

In May 1905 Matisse traveled to Collioure, a small village near the French-Spanish border. His wife Amélie had suggested the location, since she grew up nearby and had family living there. The Matisses stayed in Collioure until early September, by which time Matisse had created about fifteen canvases, forty watercolors, and over one hundred drawings. André Derain joined the Matisses in Collioure in June 1905 and wrote to his fellow painter Maurice de Vlaminck about his experience, saying that he had discovered “. . . a new concept of light, which consists in the following: the negation of shadow. Here, the light is very strong, the shadows very clear.”¹³

In *Landscape at Collioure*, Matisse applied oil paint onto an unprepared (unprimed) canvas, using paint in nonnaturalistic colors, sometimes directly from the tube and often with quick, sketchy strokes. Despite the fact that some of the canvas was left untouched, showing raw material between the strokes of paint, this painting is considered a “finished” work. By contrast, Matisse’s *Study for “Luxe, calme et volupté”* was a sketch made as preparation for another painting, and was never intended to be displayed as a finished work of art.

12. Charles Baudelaire, *Invitation to the Voyage* from *The Flowers of Evil*, c. 1850s; repr. *Baudelaire: Invitation to the Voyage, a Poem Illustrated*, trans. Richard Wilbur (New York: Bulfinch Press, 1997).

13. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory: 1900–2000* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 64.

- **How does knowing this information affect your ideas about the work?**

Some art critics and historians have described work such as Matisse's *Landscape at Collioure* as "unfinished." Audiences at the time were used to paintings that filled the entire canvas, and that were rendered in naturalistic colors and were often varnished. However, later art critics discussed the idea of "finished" and "unfinished" works of art as being something distinctively modern.

Using this idea and Matisse's *Landscape at Collioure* as starting points, have your students discuss what makes a finished work of art.

- **Ask your students how they know when they have finished a painting, sculpture, or other work of art.**
- **Ask them to think about works of art they have made at school or at home. Ask them why they stopped when they did. Ask if they think they could have stopped earlier.**
- **Ask your students to consider why Matisse might have stopped painting *Landscape at Collioure* when he did. Ask what they think the work would have been like if he had continued working on it.**
- **Show your students *Picture with an Archer* by Vasily Kandinsky (Image Twelve). Ask them to look at it carefully for a few moments. Have them compare this painting with Matisse's *Landscape at Collioure*. Ask them to describe the main similarities and differences.**

Vasily Kandinsky painted this work during a summer visit to a small town called Murnau in the south Bavarian Alps, a particularly dramatic and mountainous region that he and three other avant-garde artists who lived in Munich visited regularly between 1908 and 1911. Famous for its local folk art, especially paintings on glass, which the visiting artists collected and emulated, Murnau was similar to the small rural towns that Kandinsky had visited while practicing law in his native Russia.

- **Ask your students to think about how Kandinsky evoked the atmosphere of a rural culture or setting in *Picture with an Archer*. Ask them to give examples from the work to support their ideas.**

ACTIVITIES/PROJECTS

1. Gauguin in Tahiti (Image Nine)

What Gauguin found in Tahiti was a culture significantly altered by 125 years of French colonial rule. Although native traditions were all but wiped out, he attempted to evoke an untouched and harmonious culture in his work. Gauguin's image of precolonial Tahiti was largely based on an 1837 book by a Belgian explorer, Jacques Antoine Moerenhout. Most of Gauguin's Tahitian works had very little connection to the reality of the Tahiti that he experienced.

Have your students create their own "travel journal," just as Gauguin did, based on either a real visit or on an imaginary one. They should reflect on whether or not the visit lived up to their expectations. They should consider how the experience was different from what they were expecting, what their expectations were based on, and whether or not they would visit again.

2. The Blaue Reiter (Image Twelve)

Research the lives and works of other artists associated with the **Blaue Reiter** group. How would you compare their work with Kandinsky's? Look closely at work by one of these artists before and after his or her membership in the group. How was the artist's work affected by being part of this group? How did it change after the group dissolved? Look at connections with other artists working at the time, such as the Dutch artist Piet Mondrian. What was distinctive about the Blaue Reiter artists?

Kandinsky was interested in creating an art that described the essence, rather than the external appearance, of things he saw in the world. This was largely due to the influence of Theosophy, a spiritual movement that foretold a future in which all material things would be destroyed, leaving only their essence. This informed his intentions of creating an art of "internal necessity."¹⁴ For instance, he once saw a painting of a haystack in an exhibition and was unable to recognize what the subject was. He remarked:

It was from the catalogue that I learned this was a haystack. I was upset I had not recognized it. I also thought the painter had no right to paint in such an imprecise fashion.¹⁵

- **Ask your students how they think Kandinsky's ideas about abstract art are reflected in *Picture with an Archer*. They should give examples from the work to support their ideas.**
- **Ask your students why, based on the information given in these lessons, they think the Blaue Reiter artists chose to create images in the manner that they did.**

3. Kandinsky Goes Abstract (Image Twelve)

The word "abstract" is used to describe ideas or images that do not depict the visual appearance of things in the world in a naturalistic manner. Kandinsky did not want us to look at an image and try to figure out what it depicts or what story it tells; rather, he invites us to leave behind our attachment to the material world and immerse ourselves instead in the color and rhythm of the image.

Ask your students to research the meaning of abstract art by looking at examples of abstraction throughout the twentieth century. Examples from MoMA's collection that could be used include Joan Miró, Jackson Pollock, and Piet Mondrian (www.moma.org/collection/depts/paint_sculpt.html). Discuss why these examples might be thought of as abstract, and why the artists might have wanted to make this kind of art. Ask your students how they would define abstract art, judging by the works they have looked at in their research. Ask how they would compare their definition with Kandinsky's idea of abstraction. Ask them if they can make any connections between their ideas and other works of art discussed in this guide.

14. Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 89.

15. www.modjourn.brown.edu/mjp/image/kandinsky/kandinsky.html