

MODULE NINE

Modern Sculpture

The selected works are iconic sculptures in the collection of The Museum of Modern Art. They are three-dimensional objects, incorporating volume and mass into their structures. Two of the artists, Umberto Boccioni and Pablo Picasso, created important three-dimensional works in addition to making paintings and drawings, while Constantin Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti, and Claes Oldenburg, were known primarily as sculptors. When discussing these works, take into account the materials used and their relationship to the subject matter.

Umberto Boccioni. *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*. 1913

- How would you describe this figure's physical appearance?
- What is this man doing? What aspects of this sculpture suggest movement?
- This sculpture is made of bronze. Why do you think Boccioni chose this material?

Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916) made the following declaration about art in 1910: "All subjects previously used must be swept aside in order to express our whirling life of steel, of pride, of fever and of speed." *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* embodies Futurism's embrace of modern subject matter and new modes of representation. In this static work Boccioni created a sense of movement: the figure seems to stride forward, the contours of its body shifting as it moves through space. The forward movement may be symbolic of the progress of humankind, including the advancements associated with modernity.



Pablo Picasso. *Guitar*. 1914

- How is this sculpture different from an actual guitar? Consider the shape and structure of each.
- How do you think Picasso made this piece?
- Why do you think Picasso chose to use sheet metal and wire in his depiction of a guitar?

Before 1909, Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) used the traditional sculptural technique of modeling in clay. With *Guitar* he abandoned modeling in favor of a constructive process of combining preexisting elements. This process echoes the collage technique of pasting together pieces of torn or cut paper, which Picasso and his colleague Georges Braque developed in the early twentieth



century. Synthesizing ordinary materials—sheet metal and string—Picasso built a representation of a guitar. While his rendition clearly depicts the popular instrument, the intermixing of volume and void breaks down its familiar form.

Constantin Brancusi. *Fish*. 1930

- How would you describe the marble Brancusi carved to make this sculpture?
- This sculpture lacks the defining features of a fish's body. Why do you think Brancusi chose to eliminate these key attributes?
- How would the work be different if the pedestal was smaller or larger?

Fish, a long slab of polished marble above a pedestal of three stacked cylinders, does not have the typical physical attributes of its subject: it has no face, fins, or tail; all that remains is a horizontal, oblong form. Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957) was more interested in conveying the fish's inherent character than describing its physical appearance. "Simplicity is not an end in art," he said, "but we arrive at simplicity in spite of ourselves as we approach the real sense of things."



Turn and Talk: Choose an animal and consider how you would sculpt it in order to capture its essence. What materials would you use? How representative or abstract would your work be?

Alberto Giacometti. *Man Pointing*. 1947

- What is this figure doing? What does his gesture suggest to you?
- How would you describe the surface and texture of this work?
- The figure is thin and elongated. Why do you think Giacometti depicted it this way?

In 1945 Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966) adopted the human figure as his primary subject. Though he cast works in bronze, he initially sculpted the figures in clay, digging away at the surface. The emaciated appearance of his male and female figures, sometimes solitary and sometimes grouped together, creates an overall impression of isolation within the surrounding space, which has been interpreted as symbolic of the angst prevalent in the years following World War II.



Claes Oldenburg. *Floor Cone*. 1962

- Describe the form of this work. How does it compare to an actual ice cream cone?
- This work is about four-and-a-half feet long, eleven feet wide, and four-and-a-half feet high. How does knowing the size affect your interpretation of the work?
- How would you describe the overall mood of this work?



Claes Oldenburg (born 1929) is known for his larger-than-life sculptures of common objects. He is associated with Pop art—a movement of the 1950s and 1960s incorporating popular imagery and commercial processes into artwork. In *Floor Cone* Oldenburg has altered the size and texture of an ice cream cone, resulting in a large, flaccid work with comedic overtones. The synthetic polymer paint, canvas, foam, rubber, and cardboard boxes from which Oldenburg constructed the work exemplify Pop artists' tendency to use commercial materials in their work.

Turn and Talk: Oldenburg drew from commercial imagery and experiences for the subject matter of his works. What images of commercial products were prevalent when you were a child? What experiences do you associate with these images?

Art-Making Activity

In this module we considered different materials and processes used in modern sculpture. With Pablo Picasso's *Guitar* in mind, ask participants to construct a three-dimensional work using pieces of paper. They can cut, rip, or tear the pieces, as they like. Ask them to depict a particular object; if they like, they can find inspiration from the figures and objects discussed in this module—a person, instrument, or animal. Be sure to include paper varying in thickness, texture, color, and pattern. Encourage participants to build a three-dimensional object, not a flat collage.