

PICTURING AMERICA LESSON

The Artist's Vision: Abstraction and the American West

Since the early days of the United States, American artists have depicted their nation's landscape as an iconic motif. Following westward expansion of the nineteenth century, artists, too, began to settle their gazes on the unexplored terrain of the American West. By the twentieth century, the emerging visual language of abstraction provided new ways for artists to depict the world around them. This lesson examines two key works of American western landscape and guides students through the process of responding to abstract art.



Red and Orange Streak, 1919
Georgia O'Keeffe, American
Oil on canvas
27 x 23 inches (68.6 x 58.4 cm)
Bequest of Georgia O'Keeffe for the Alfred
Stieglitz Collection, 1987
1987-70-3

Grade Level

For grades 4–12

Common Core Academic Standards

**SOCIAL STUDIES (WESTWARD EXPANSION),
LANGUAGE ARTS (DEVELOPMENT OF THEME)**

- Reading Informational Text: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media #7
- Listening and Speaking in Collaboration: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations #1; Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats #2

Art Images Required

Click on the Museum object title below to view a high-resolution photograph on the Philadelphia Museum of Art website. Click on the Picturing America object titles to view those resources on the National Endowment for the Humanities website. Images that are also available in the ARTstor Digital Library are indicated by an ID number or search phrase. Entering that number or phrase into the ARTstor search bar will direct you to the corresponding image in that database.

RELATED PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART OBJECT:

- [Red and Orange Streak](#), 1919, by Georgia O'Keeffe
ARTstor search: not available on ARTstor

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

RELATED PICTURING AMERICA OBJECTS:

- [Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California](#), 1865, by Albert Bierstadt
ARTstor search: "looking down yosemite valley" bierstadt (be sure to use quotation marks)
- [Cityscape 1](#), 1963, by Richard Diebenkorn
ARTstor search: diebenkorn, cityscape

Lesson Process

1. Take some time, either as a class or in small groups, to look closely at each work, reading the background information provided online. (Be sure to review the "Teacher Resources" on the Museum website.) Discuss what you have discovered, including any questions you may still have about the paintings.
2. Begin with a close examination of Albert Bierstadt's *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California* (1865). Where do your eyes go first? What about that area caught your attention? List the colors you see in this painting. What time of day do the colors evoke? What emotional impression does this landscape convey? Make a second list of the emotional words which come to mind.
3. Examine Georgia O'Keeffe's *Red and Orange Streak* (1919). Where do your eyes go first? What was it about this area that caught your attention? Again, list the colors. Do these colors convey a time of day? Make a list of emotional words for this painting as well.
4. Compare your lists of emotional words for the two paintings. What cues were used in each painting to create your list? Colors? Lines? Shapes? Objects? How did the artists convey similar feelings?
5. On a piece of paper, make a sketch of the lines used by O'Keeffe in her painting. Use only the main lines in order to keep things simple. Now try the same process with Bierstadt's work. Again, focus only on the main lines, both straight and curved. Which sketch has more diagonal lines? Which has more vertical and horizontal lines? Now look back at the paintings. Which painting seems to have more movement? Which is more still? How does movement or stillness add to the theme and emotion of each painting?
6. Research the meaning(s) of the word "abstract." Notice the similarities in its many meanings. How can you use this term to describe the differences between these two paintings? In a small group, review what you have seen and learned, and come to some conclusions about the goal of the abstract artist. Share with other groups in the class.

Assessment

1. Review your line sketch of Bierstadt's painting, and use it as the basis of your own abstract representation. Add key colors, shapes, and necessary details. Be ready to discuss your abstraction and the decisions you made.
2. Select another work of art (landscape or portrait) and create an abstract version of it. Describe your process in an expository essay format.

Enrichment

1. Examine closely *Cityscape 1* (1963) by Richard Diebenkorn. Even though *Cityscape 1* is more easily identifiable than O'Keeffe's *Red and Orange Streak*, how does each of these works represent the process of abstraction?
2. We use the process of abstraction all the time. What other examples of abstraction exist? In text? In film? Brainstorm and create a list of your ideas.