CREATE AN ABSTRACT URBAN LANDSCAPE

Grade Levels: 7–12
Estimated Time: 2–3 hours

Introduction:
In the early 20th century, artists were inspired not only by views of nature, but also by the urban landscapes rapidly emerging around them. Georgia O’Keeffe’s The Shelton with Sunspots, N.Y. (see page 58) abstracts a skyscraper in New York City, emphasizing organic and geometric shapes. Marsden Hartley’s Movements (see page 50) is inspired by the fast pace and modern excitement of living in the city of Berlin, expressing those sensations through densely layered shapes and intense colors. Students will examine the two paintings and then make their own abstract compositions from images of cityscapes, focusing on how to express qualities of urban space and life through shape and color.

Lesson Objectives:
• Analyze works of abstract art.
• Design abstract compositions to express specific qualities and sensations related to urban space.
• Translate words and ideas into visual images.

Key Terms:  
- abstract
- composition
- organic
- geometric

Instructional Materials:
• pencil
• paint
• drawing paper
• glue
• scissors
• construction paper

Procedures:
Discussion:
• Using the image on page 58 or on the enclosed CD, examine The Shelton with Sunspots, N.Y. with students. Ask them to describe what they see. What is the subject of this painting? What kinds of shapes does O’Keeffe use? What colors? Students should observe how O’Keeffe simplifies forms into large, colored shapes, and note the combination of organic and geometric forms.
• Have students bring in images of urban landscapes found in books, magazines, or on the Internet. Lay out images on a large table or pin up to a bulletin board. As a class, list nouns, verbs, and adjectives or adverbs associated with cities and cityscapes with students while looking at the pictures.
LESSON PLANS

- Examine *Movements* (see image 17 or the enclosed CD) with students. Ask students to describe what they see. If students make broad interpretive statements, guide them toward describing elements in the painting that they can actually point to, such as “a black triangular form behind a red circle.” Have students describe the lines, shapes, and colors in the painting. What forms are in the foreground and which are in the background? Explain to students that Hartley painted this picture while living abroad in the city of Berlin and that some have interpreted it as being inspired by modern urban life. How does the title of the painting support this interpretation? Ask students if this painting makes them think of cities. Go back to the list of words they have associated with cities. Which of these words can be used to describe this painting or an element within it?

Activity:
- Have students select an image of an urban landscape from the assortment they have brought to inspire an abstract composition. Students should also choose a noun, verb, and an adjective or adverb from the brainstorm list.
- Have students begin by making a sketch of their image using pencil on paper, reducing the pictures to a few large forms. Remind students that the negative spaces between solid forms are shapes as well.
- Based on these shapes and the selected words, students compose abstractions in paint, trying to convey their “city words.” Have students consider the relative scale of the shapes, their placement in relation to one another, whether shapes overlap or abut against one another, and their color.
- (As an alternative to painting, students may collage cut shapes from colored paper.)

Evaluation:
Base students’ evaluations on their participation in class discussion, and their ability to abstract shapes from photographic sources and organize them in an expressive composition.

**Illinois Learning Standards:**

- English Language Arts 3
- Fine Arts 25, 26

For more detailed information on the Illinois Learning Standards, see [http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/](http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/).