Introduction

During the 20th century, artists experimented with different techniques to create art, including creating paintings or sculptures that do not necessarily depict realistic or representational subjects. Artists often experimented with colors and shapes as a way to convey feeling and emotion. They also chose as subjects simple objects from daily life, such as a bird or a clothespin, and sometimes incorporated these actual objects into the artworks. This self-guide is designed to help you and your students explore art of the 20th century at the Art Institute. As you look at these art objects, take time to notice details. Ask yourself: How do I feel looking at the object? Why did the artist choose to make this artwork in this manner? If I were to make a similar piece, what would I do differently?
This sculpture may initially look as if it does not represent something we find in real life, but it in fact does. This artwork depicts a bird, perched on its tiny feet, with its back straight and breast puffed full of air. Its head reaches upward and its mouth is open. Instead of representing all of the details of an actual bird, Constantin Brancusi showed us the entire bird in just one simplified shape. The smooth, upwardly thrust form illustrates the airiness and elegance of a bird in flight. The shiny, sleek, golden surface may remind us of modern technological and industrial designs that used metal materials constructed in futuristic designs. It is said that Brancusi went to an air show in Paris in 1912 with some other artists and exclaimed that an airplane propeller was a beautiful work of sculpture.

Brancusi perched his bird on a natural base of wood and stone. In contrast to the fluid, organic lines of the bronze form, the base is geometric, made of stacked pyramids and a large rectangular form. Each of the parts is taller than it is wide and appears as a platform, possibly to help the bird lift off into flight. Brancusi emphasized the beauty of the natural wood by displaying the tree’s age rings, which some may associate with planets or constellation patterns. Brancusi signed this sculpture by carving his initials C B into the wood.

Ask students:

- Without looking at the title of this sculpture, what do you think it represents?
  - What aspects of the sculpture make you think that?
- What does the sculpture remind you of?
- Think about the shapes, colors, materials, and subject of this sculpture.
  - What parts of this sculpture are realistic, as we would see in real life?
  - What parts are imaginary?
- Why do you think the artist choose to sculpt a bird in this way?
- Do you think the artist liked birds? Why or why not?
Maurice de Vlaminck (vlah-MINK) painted many landscapes, but not all naturalistic (as we see in nature). His landscapes consist of many curved lines and vibrant colors. Vlaminck chose non-naturalistic colors as a way of expressing his feelings. Beside blue and white, this sky contains pink, purple, and sea-green. The land and trees are made of red, blue, green, yellow, and black. Vlaminck loaded his brush with paint and left his brush strokes visible, allowing us to imagine the artist passionately working and infusing energy into his creation. This landscape also shows a man who appears to be farming or gardening. He may be difficult to see at first because the few curved lines of paint that make up his body almost blend into the landscape. This figure is painted like the rest of the painting, and therefore is given no more importance than the trees, land, houses, or sky.

This landscape shows the area of Chatou, an area near Paris where Vlaminck shared a studio with another artist, André Derain (1880–1954). Vlaminck and Derain were part of a group of artists called the Fauves (fove), which in French means “wild beasts”. This group’s works are based on the natural world, but include intense colors to create wild and imaginative paintings. Vlaminck is best known as a painter, but he also played the violin, worked as a mechanic, and was a bicycle racer.
Joseph Cornell made many boxes like this one, each containing several seemingly unrelated objects. At the bottom of this box are a pipe and a small glass containing crumpled newspaper, a piece of driftwood, and a piece of coral. Above the glass are two glass shelves. The lower shelf holds a white wooden ball and a blue marble. Another blue marble sits on the upper shelf. The rear interior wall is covered with dark blue velvet, and the side interior walls are covered with scraps of a Spanish newspaper. The ball and the marbles appear to be floating above the pipe and suggest bubbles coming out of the pipe. However, the dark blue velvet background can also appear as a night sky and the ball and marbles as planets and the moon.

Some people believe that Cornell started making these collage boxes (artistic composition made of various materials) to entertain his younger brother who had cerebral palsy and could not leave the house. He searched flea markets, thrift shops, and dime stores for objects for his boxes. By placing everyday objects that initially appear unrelated next to each other, new and interesting associations are created. Cornell’s boxes often have images related to childhood, astronomy, birds, nature, and ballerinas.

Ask students to describe this artwork.
- What objects do you see in this box?
- What are the objects made of?
- Which objects seem as if they can move about?
- What do these objects remind you of?

Compare and contrast the objects in the box.
- How do they relate to each other?
- Why do you think Cornell placed these objects in a box?
- Where do you think he found these objects?
- Do you think they had special meaning to him?
  - If so, what might that be?
- If you could put objects in a box, what would you include? Why?

Think of a special event that was important to you (for example, a birthday party or holiday dinner).
- What objects remind you of this event?
- List these objects and explain how they remind you of the event.
- Make a sketch of a picture that includes these objects.
Joan Miró (wahn mee-ROH) was a Spanish artist who often created dreamlike paintings. His pictures are full of images that remind us of everyday objects, yet they are not things we see in real life. One shape looks like a teepee, and two others appear to have either outreaching hands or antennae. Many of these shapes are drawn in black paint with only limited areas of color on the inside. By using different types of lines, Miró gave these shapes different appearances. Some of the black lines forming the shapes are straight and rigid, making them appear solid or heavy. Other lines are curvy, which help make the shapes appear to be in motion or floating in air. Miró liked to experiment with incorporating unusual materials into his paintings (painting-collages). This artwork includes gravel and pebbles that are painted over, adding a rough texture to the surface.

Miró did not want his paintings to make logical sense. Beside creating abstract images, he merely titled many of his works “painting.” By giving his works indefinite titles, he did not provide the viewer with any clues about a painting’s meaning or content. It is up to each viewer to try to figure out what the images are and what the scene or story is. Different viewers can bring their own interpretations to paintings like this and come up with different meanings for what they see.
Chuck Close’s work consists of large paintings of the faces of friends and colleagues. This portrait is of the artist Alex Katz (b. 1927) and was created in much the same way Close made his other portrait paintings. Close started by taking a large Polaroid picture of the subject, then drawing a grid over the photograph. Next, he made a grid with the same number of squares on a large canvas and painted each individual square until the whole painting was completed. Each square of the overall painting is made up of several abstracted images and shapes. When we look at the entire painting from a distance, the individual shapes blend and create the image of the subject’s face in a surprisingly accurate likeness.

Close became paralyzed in 1988 and uses a wheelchair to move around. Although he isn’t able to move his arms much, he created a method of holding a paintbrush in a hand brace so that he can still paint. He also has a special motorized easel, which can move up and down and back and forth, so that he can paint all parts of his large canvases. Close has been extremely creative and successful at working with his physical disability.

Have students get as close as possible to the painting to observe it more closely.

Ask students:
- What shapes do you see?
- What image do these shapes form?
- How do you think the artist used the grid when painting this artwork?
- Why do you think Close painted this portrait so big?
- How do you feel looking at a face that is so big?

Post-visit Activity
- Enlarge a photograph or magazine illustration and draw a grid on top of it.
- Cut up the picture, give one square to each student, and have each student make a drawing of what is on his or her square.
- Reassemble the picture and compare to see how closely it resembles the original photograph.
- Discuss the outcome in relationship to the artwork of Chuck Close.
Claes (klaus) Oldenburg has made many large sculptures of everyday objects that are normally rather small, such as a baseball bat, a tube of lipstick, and a piece of cake. By making objects much bigger than normal, Oldenburg encourages viewers to closely look at the shape of the object and consider the importance of the object in everyday life. Oldenburg got the idea of making a large clothespin when he was flying into Chicago. He had an ordinary wooden clothespin with him because he liked the shape. As he looked outside of the airplane window down at the buildings of Chicago, he realized that the buildings looked about the same size as his clothespin. He then decided that it would be fun to make a very large sculpture of a clothespin.

Oldenburg believes in making art that all people can enjoy. He does not believe that art has to be difficult to understand or that art is only for people with a lot of money. He believes that art should deal with everyday objects and his works are often humorous and witty. He wrote:

I am for art that unfolds like a map, that you can squeeze, like your sweetie’s arm, or kiss, like a pet dog. Which expands and squeaks, like an accordion, which you can spill your dinner on, like an old tablecloth.

(“I am for an Art,” Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings, 1996)

Oldenburg has made several sculptures for public spaces so that many people can enjoy them. For example, he made a large sculpture of a baseball bat called Batcolumn that is located outside the Social Security Administration building at 600 West Madison Street in Chicago.

Ask Students:

- Why do you think Oldenburg made a sculpture of a clothespin?
- Why do you think he made the sculpture so big?
- How do you feel standing next to this sculpture?
- This clothespin is 10 feet tall. Compare the size of this sculpture to other large objects.
- Is this clothespin bigger or smaller than a tree, a house, a flagpole?
- Does this large clothespin remind you of anything else?

Post-visit Activity

(gallery or classroom)

- Think of a small object that you often use (for example, a toothbrush or a remote control).
- Imagine how this object would look if it were really big.
- Draw a picture of yourself and an enlarged version of the object.
- Describe how your life would be different if this object actually was very big. How would you then use the object?
Instead of just being looked at, this artwork requires interaction with the visitor to make it complete. Unlike most works of art in a museum, you are actually allowed to touch this piece and also invited to take away a piece of candy. Gonzalez-Torres wanted to share his artwork with the public and wanted people to be able to take a piece of his creations with them.

Gonzalez-Torres made this artwork in honor of his partner, Ross, who died of causes related to AIDS. The candy pile starts each day at 175 pounds, which was Ross’s ideal body weight. As visitors take candy, the pile gets smaller. This occurrence represents Ross’s weight loss as a result of his illness. (Museum staff replenishes the candy each day so that it starts at 175 pounds.) Gonzalez-Torres chose to portray his partner with these multicolored, shiny candies. Seeing such a large pile of candy on the floor, one thinks of abundance, sweetness, and happiness. These feelings must have corresponded to Gonzalez-Torres’s relationship with Ross, and in his memory Gonzalez-Torres wants to share the goodness of Ross with all of us.

You are welcome to take a piece of candy with you. Please wait until you leave the museum to eat it.

Ask Students:

• What does this pile of candy make you think of?
• How do you feel looking it on the floor?
• Explain that this artwork is a portrait of the artist’s partner.
• Why do you think the artist chose to portray his partner in this way?
• What do you think the candies symbolize?
• How do you think Gonzalez-Torres felt about Ross based on this portrait?

We normally cannot touch artworks in a museum.

• Describe how you feel as you approach the candy, touch it, and take a piece.
• Why do you think the artist wants us to take away part of his artwork?

Think of an important person in your life.

• What object could you use to represent that person?