

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Monet and his Modern Legacy brings together paintings by the French Impressionist Claude Monet (1840 – 1926) and works by North American abstract artists of the 1950s through 1970s who were influenced by his style.

In the latter part of his career, Monet increasingly abandoned many formal conventions of painting, including the use of horizon lines and recognizability of the subject. Instead, he strove to capture the sensations of light and color within nature. The large, abstract paintings that resulted from his quest were widely dismissed at the time but were rediscovered in the mid-20th century by an art world that was more receptive to abstraction. A new generation of artists, many of whom are associated with the Abstract Expressionist movement, shared Monet's interest in exploring feelings, sensations, and formal relationships through light and color. By showcasing their work alongside examples of Monet's late style, this exhibition explores Monet's legacy as a pioneer of abstract art.



View of the exhibition galleries

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Through the activities outlined in this guide:

- Students will look closely at the work of Claude Monet and of several Abstract Expressionist artists, comparing and contrasting their artistic choices.
- Students will examine the conventions of landscape painting and consider the ways in which Monet and Abstract Expressionist artists defy those conventions.
- Students will explore ways of depicting nature abstractly.

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide can be used to supplement a class visit to *Monet and his Modern Legacy* at the Nelson-Atkins or to support classroom study of exhibition works that are viewable in the museum's online collection. To view images and label information for works referenced in the guide, visit art.nelson-atkins.org/mycollections/6397/monet-and-his-modern-legacy.

In the *Before Your Visit* section of the guide, you will find activities and discussion questions to use when preparing students for the exhibition. The *In the Exhibition* section can facilitate exploration within the museum or while viewing works online, and the *Extend Your Learning* section provides post-visit suggestions that build on what students have seen. In addition, a *Meet the Artists* section, a timeline, and a glossary of terms offer helpful context for the exhibition, and a list of suggested resources can serve as a springboard for further learning.

This guide is targeted to middle and high school art students but can be adapted to a range of grade levels and subject areas.

To schedule a teacher-led tour of the *Monet and his Modern Legacy* exhibition, visit nelson-atkins.org/educators/school-tours.

MEET THE ARTISTS



Claude Monet (French, 1840 – 1926)

A key figure in the Impressionist movement, his attempts to capture nature as he perceived it were a precursor to modernism. In his later years, he produced repeated studies of the same subject (the façade of a cathedral, stacks of wheat, water lilies, etc.) under different environmental conditions and at different times of the day.



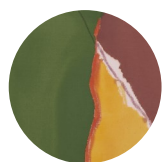
Norman Bluhm (American, 1921 – 1999)

Born in Chicago, he studied architecture and fought in World War II before becoming a painter. Met Sam Francis and Jean-Paul Riopelle (other artists in the exhibition) in Paris, where they studied Monet's late works. Bluhm's interest in surface and color led him to paint with layers of diluted oil paint and energetic brushstrokes.



Sam Francis (American, 1923 – 1994)

One of the first American post-World War II painters to rise to international fame. Transitioned from early monochromatic works to a more energetic style with drips and splatters of primary colors after seeing Monet's *Water Lilies* on view in Paris.



Helen Frankenthaler (American, 1928 – 2011)

Her "soak-stain" technique of thinning paint and pouring it onto canvas is credited with sparking the transition from Abstract Expressionism to Color Field Painting, which celebrated pure color. Her love of color and matte surfaces evokes Monet's late style.



Philip Guston (American, born Canada, 1913 – 1980)

A founding figure in the influential New York School of Abstract Expressionist artists, his style shifted between abstraction and realism over his long career. He and Monet shared similar ways of working organically by scraping and repainting a surface to build up layers of paint.



Grace Hartigan (American, 1922 – 2008)

Experimented with total abstraction early in her career, treating paintings as dynamic and textured objects rather than literal representations of reality. Later came to incorporate more recognizable imagery into her work.



Paul Jenkins (American, 1923 – 2012)

After graduating from the Kansas City Art Institute, lived in both New York and Paris, where he met up with fellow artist Sam Francis and others. Developed a unique painting technique that involved pouring acrylic on primed canvas and guiding the paint with an ivory knife.



Roy Lichtenstein (American, 1923 – 1997)

Worked briefly in the Abstract Expressionist style, but is best known for his Pop Art paintings that incorporate imagery and techniques from commercial printing, such as exaggerated Ben-Day dots.



Jules Olitski (American, 1922 – 2007)

Immigrated to the United States from the Soviet Union as a child. His interest in the material properties of paint led him to experiment with various techniques for applying paint to canvas, including brushes, sponges, mops, rollers, and spray guns. Moving to Paris and reading articles by critic Clement Greenberg about Monet's late style changed his approach to art.



Jean-Paul Riopelle (Canadian, 1923 – 2002)

Canadian painter and sculptor who is best known for his "mosaic" painting technique that involved spreading paint onto a canvas with a palette knife, creating a distinctive sculptural appearance. Moved to Vétheuil, the same town where Monet lived and painted for three years.

TIMELINE: IMPRESSIONISM & ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

- 1840** Claude Monet is born in Paris.
- 1874** Monet helps organize the First Impressionist Exhibition in Paris, which includes 12 of his works.
- 1890 – 1925** Monet works on several series of paintings depicting repeated subjects: stacks of grain, the façade of the Rouen Cathedral, and the water lily pond at his home in Giverny.
- 1912** Monet is diagnosed with cataracts. He experiences blurring of vision, sensitivity to light, and a shift in color perception. This coincides with an increasing degree of abstraction in his painting style. He develops a system of organizing his palette by color in order to maintain complex color relationships in his canvases.
- 1918** Monet announces a gift of 22 large-scale *Water Lilies* paintings to the French State to be exhibited in the round at the Musée de l'Orangerie, an exhibition space in Paris that Monet helped design.
- 1926** Monet dies at the age of 86. Shortly after his death, eight of his water lily paintings are installed at the Musée de l'Orangerie. Reviews are mixed, with some critics calling the works "unintelligible," or worse yet, "completely insane."
- 1920s** Many of the artists who will become part of the second generation of Abstract Expressionists are born during this decade.
- 1940s** Abstract Expressionism takes shape in New York City among such artists as Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Mark Rothko. The Orangerie temporarily closes after a 1944 bombing.
- 1952** The Orangerie re-opens, and artist André Masson publishes an article calling it "the Sistine Chapel of Impressionism." Artists and critics take note. Exhibition of Monet's late works at museums in Zurich, Paris, and The Netherlands.
- 1955** The Museum of Modern Art becomes the first U.S. museum to acquire one of Monet's late *Water Lilies* panels.
- 1956** Exhibitions of Monet's late works in Paris and New York catch the attention of critics and artists associated with Abstract Expressionism. St. Louis Art Museum acquires the central panel of the *Water Lilies* canvases known as 'the Agapanthus triptych.'
- 1957** The Nelson-Atkins acquires the right-hand panel of Monet's *Water Lilies* (Agapanthus triptych) after students and faculty at the Kansas City Art Institute write a letter pushing for its acquisition.
- 1950s – 1970s** Second generation of Abstract Expressionist artists is active in New York and elsewhere.

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Have students spend time looking at European and American landscape paintings that predate the birth of Impressionism in the 1870s. A few examples from the Nelson-Atkins are provided below. Discuss:

- What do these scenes have in common?
- Can you imagine what it would be like to step inside each scene? What might you hear, smell, or feel?
- What do you see in these landscapes that makes them resemble real outdoor views?

Suggested works:

- Salomon van Ruysdael, *Landscape with a Ferry*, 1644
- Claude Gellée, called Le Lorrain, *Landscape with a Piping Shepherd*, 1667
- Joseph Wright of Derby, *Outlet of Wyburne Lake*, 1796
- Asher B. Durand, *Landscape, Welch Mountain*, 1863



Next, have students compare the older landscapes with Monet's *Snow Effect at Argenteuil* (1875), one of his early Impressionist works. What is different about this depiction of nature? Encourage students to continue looking for ways Monet breaks with the conventions of painting when they view the exhibition. In particular, they can keep an eye out for:

- Larger paintings
- Changes in brushwork
- Preoccupation with color
- Surfaces coated thickly in matte layers of paint
- Less realism in subject matter

Invite students to spend time in nature in whatever way is accessible for them. Have them write or draw to record their impressions of the experience. What sights, sounds, smells, and feelings do they notice? How would they describe the atmosphere around them? When viewing the exhibition, students can see if any of the included works resonate with their own experience of nature.

IN THE EXHIBITION

View Monet's *Water Lilies* (about 1915 – 1926) and discuss:

- What “rules” of landscape painting is Monet breaking in this work?
- Can you imagine what it would be like to step inside the scene pictured here? What might you hear, smell, or feel?
- What do you see in this image that makes it feel lifelike or realistic? What do you see that makes it look abstract?



Have each student choose one of the artists' quotes that are printed in bold on the labels accompanying the paintings in the exhibition. Can students see similarities or connections between their quote and the painting that artist made? Sample quotes:

"My pictures are full of climates, abstract climates and not nature per se, but a feeling. And the feeling of an order that is associated more with nature." —*Helen Frankenthaler*

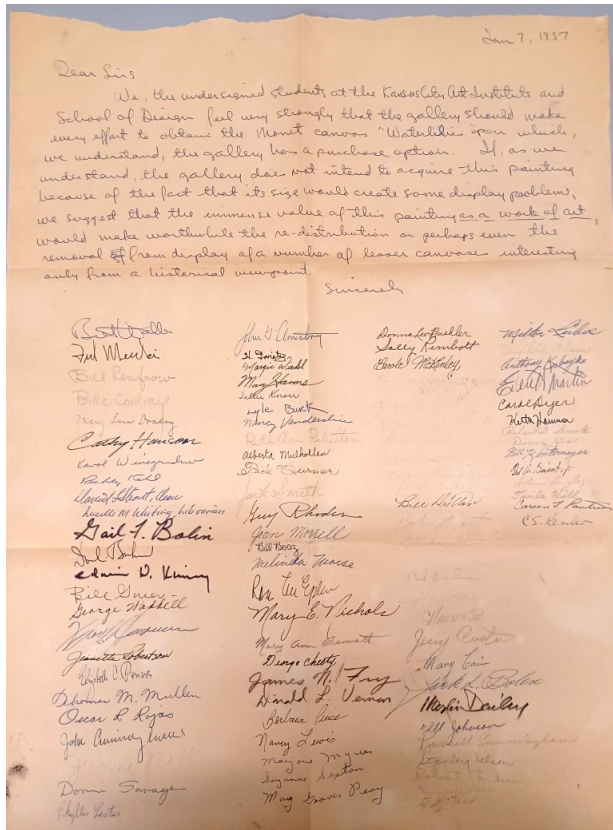
"No rules...I must be free to paint anything I feel." —*Grace Hartigan*

"My work isn't about form. It's about seeing. I'm excited about seeing things, and I'm interested in the way I think other people see things." —*Roy Lichtenstein*

Challenge students to choose one work by Monet and one work by an Abstract Expressionist artist on view in the exhibition. For their selected pairing, students can examine:

- How each artist uses color. Do they see more cool tones or warm tones? How does each artist achieve a sense of colors mixing?
- The way each artist applied paint to their canvas – does it look like it was brushed, scraped, sprayed, or applied in a different way? Do they think the paint was applied loosely or in a controlled manner?
- The overall mood or feeling each painting suggests to them. What does the artist seem to be saying?

EXTEND YOUR LEARNING



Students and staff at the Kansas City Art Institute wrote to Nelson-Atkins trustees in 1957, encouraging them to acquire Monet's *Water Lilies* due to the "immense value of this painting as a work of art." (The petition they drafted is pictured here and is reproduced in the exhibition.)

Now that students have seen the influence Monet had on other artists, would they agree with the argument in the letter? Encourage them to identify a work of art or an artist that they think should be added to the Nelson-Atkins collection today. They could even write letters advocating for their selection!

Challenge students to find examples of other modern and contemporary artists who depict nature in abstract ways. How does their work compare with the approach of Claude Monet? How does it compare with the Abstract Expressionists?

Suggested artists:

- Georgia O'Keeffe
- Arthur Dove
- Pat Steir
- Alma Thomas

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Check out these print and web resources to learn more about the art and artists discussed in this guide.

Books

Monet: Nature into Art by Debra N. Mancoff, 2003.
Available in the ERC

Understanding Abstract Art by Frank Whitford, 1987.
Available in the ERC

Abstract Art: A Global History by Pepe Karmel, 2020.
Available in the ERC

Web

“Monet's Water Lilies” from *Great Art Explained*
[youtube.com/watch?v=fd-Me3EBGY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fd-Me3EBGY)

“Claude Monet: The Truth of Nature” from *CBS Sunday Morning*, [youtube.com/watch?v=Gzai0lr70Iq](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gzai0lr70Iq)

“What is: Abstract Expressionism” from *Smarthistory*,
smarthistory.org/what-is-abstract-expressionism

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Abstract Art

Art that is made up of forms that have been simplified or stylized until they no longer resemble the objects they were based on, or forms that have no basis in external reality.

Abstract Expressionism

A type of abstract art that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s among American painters, primarily in New York City. Its aim was to achieve expressive or emotional effect through abstraction, often through the gestural application of color onto canvas.

Impressionism

A style of painting that developed in France in the second half of the 19th century. Impressionist artists tended to paint outdoors, working quickly to capture the light, color, and overall atmosphere of fleeting moments in rapid dabs and strokes of paint.

EDUCATOR RESOURCE CENTER

This guide was produced by the Educator Resource Center at the Nelson-Atkins. The ERC is available to support educators with a variety of programs and resources. If you are interested in learning more about ways to link museum works with classroom learning, we invite you to connect with the ERC to access:

- Curriculum consultations
- Circulating resources
- Professional development workshops

Visit nelson-atkins.org/educators/resources for more information.



IMAGE CREDITS

Page 2: Claude Monet (French, 1840 – 1926) *Mill at Limetz* (detail), 1888. Oil on canvas, 36 3/4 x 29 in. (93.4 x 73.7 cm). Partial bequest of Ethel B. Atha, 39-1986. | Norman Bluhm (American, 1921 – 1999) *Rashoumon* (detail), 1957. Oil on canvas, 67 1/2 x 71 in. (171.45 x 180.34 cm). Gift of Jane Wade, 60-25. | Sam Francis (American, 1923 – 1994), *Composition No. 3* (detail), 1959. Watercolor and ink on paper, 17 x 20 in. (43.18 x 50.8 cm). Gift of the Friends of Art Memorial Fund, F59-68. | Helen Frankenthaler (American, 1928 – 2011) *Cable* (detail), 1971. Acrylic on canvas, 109 1/8 x 32 1/16 in. (277.18 x 208.44 cm). Gift of the Friends of Art, F78-37. | Philip Guston (American, born Canada, 1913 – 1980) *Canal* (detail), 1958. Opaque, matte paint on paper mounted on board, 21 7/8 x 29 3/4 in. (55.56 x 75.57 cm). Gift of William Inge, 68-46. | Grace Hartigan (American, 1922 – 2008) *Bray* (detail), 1958. Oil on canvas, 60 x 50 in. (152.4 x 127 cm). Gift of William Inge, 61-76. | Paul Jenkins (American, 1923 – 2012) *Phenomena Moving Mantle* (detail), 1967. Acrylic on primed canvas, 78 x 51 in. (198.12 x 130.81 cm). Gift of David Kluger, F80-48. | Roy Lichtenstein (American, 1923 – 1997) *Haystack No. 7* (detail), 1969. Inked, embossed impression from zinc plate, 20 1/2 x 30 7/16 in. (52.07 x 77.27 cm). Gift of Paul L. Lerner in memory of Morris A. Lerner, F91-7/3. **Page 3:** Jules Olitski (American, 1922 – 2007) *Volva Radiance* (detail), 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 117 x 210 in. (297.18 x 533.4 cm). Gift of the Friends of Art, F71-16. | Jean-Paul Riopelle (Canadian, 1923 – 2002) *Untitled* (detail), ca. 1960. Oil on canvas, 29 1/2 x 28 1/2 in. (74.93 x 72.39 cm). Gift of Karen Ann Bunting, F83-69. | Claude Monet (French, 1840 – 1926) *Snow Effect at Argenteuil*, 1875. Oil on canvas, 19 13/16 x 25 3/4 in. (50.32 x 65.41 cm). Gift of Henry W. and Marion H. Bloch, 2015.13.14. | Claude Monet (French, 1840 – 1926) *Water Lilies*, ca. 1915 – 1926. Oil on canvas, 79 x 167 3/4 in. (200.66 x 426.09 cm). Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 57-26.

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