

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON

Exploring the Elements of Art

SELECTED WORKS OF ART FROM THE TOUR



Improvisation 31 (Sea Battle)

1913

by Wassily Kandinsky
(Russian, 1866–1944)

■ Painting at the beginning of the twentieth century, Wassily Kandinsky was one of the first artists to develop an abstract style, paintings that emphasize the expressive potential of color and shape. Kandinsky's recognition of the importance of shape and color stemmed from his reaction upon returning to his studio and seeing one of his paintings upside down. He did not recognize the subject, but was impressed by the picture's radiant appearance.

Accordingly, it is shape and color that first strike your attention when you look at Kandinsky's *Improvisation 31 (Sea Battle)*. The importance of these abstract elements is suggested by the work's title, which speaks first to the nature of its composition (an "improvisation") and secondly, and parenthetically, to its ostensible subject, a sea battle. Although a careful examination of the painting reveals the forms of two warring boats (strong black vertical lines define their masts and the triangular shapes of their sails), this is not the exclusive "subject" of the painting. The work testifies to the power of form and color, both of which Kandinsky believed could convey meaning. Blue, according to Kandinsky, was a "heavenly color," while yellow was "aggressive." Green, a combination of the two, implied calm. Kandinsky identified the triangle, with its suggestion of upward motion, as a particularly spiritual shape.

As such theories might suggest, Kandinsky's painting, which appears spontaneous, was in fact carefully thought out and not simply an "improvisation."

QUESTIONS

- 1 If this painting were a piece of music, what would it sound like?
- 2 What colors do you associate with excitement? With a quiet mood?
- 3 Would you prefer to make abstract or representational paintings? Why?

Bird in Space

1925

by Constantin Brancusi
(Romanian, 1876–1957)

■ Poised upon its wooden and stone base, Brancusi's marble bird seems to soar to the heavens. The surface of this "bird in space" is entirely smooth, with no suggestion of feathers, and its form is long and tapering. We see no head, beak, or wings. Rather than depicting the features of one particular, individual bird, Brancusi has instead captured the essence of flight itself, imitating the shape of a bird seen from afar as it draws its wings to its side and soars upward. Because the marble surface of Brancusi's bird is so highly polished it reflects the light and seems to glow. This lends a spiritual quality to the abstracted form.

Note that Brancusi's sculpture is not limited to the form of the bird, but also incorporates a wooden and a stone base on which the bird rests. These elements physically raise the bird up, accentuating its vertical thrust. But the materials themselves also occupied a symbolic hierarchy in Brancusi's mind, with wood being most earthly, polished marble the most ethereal, and stone in between. Working our way from the bottom up, we can understand the sculpture as a whole as depicting a transition from the physical world to the spiritual realm.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Brancusi made other versions of this work using different materials. There is another *Bird in Space* made of brass at the National Gallery of Art. If you were making a sculpture, what materials would you like to work in? Why?
- 2 Describe all the shapes that Brancusi used in this sculpture, working your way from the base up to the top. How do these different shapes contribute to the effect of the whole?
- 3 What colors do you see in this sculpture? Where do they come from? What emotional tone do they strike?

Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. IV

1930

(detail, cover)

by Georgia O’Keeffe
(American, 1887–1986)

■ Georgia O’Keeffe’s *Jack-in-the-Pulpit No. IV* dramatically transforms our typical viewing experience of this wildflower. O’Keeffe enlarged the scale of the flower, allowing a single blossom to fill the entire frame of her canvas. Indeed, the edges of the flower actually flow outside the edges of the painting. O’Keeffe focuses our observation on the subtle curves and structure of the petals, bringing us into the interior of the flower. As the title suggests, the painting is the fourth in a series of six images of the jack-in-the-pulpit, with each painting presenting a slightly more magnified view of the flower and gradually abstracting it into relationships of color and form.

While O’Keeffe’s painting has botanical precision, it also has a spiritual quality. Gradations in color create the impression of a halo that envelops the blossom, a visual effect that may have been partially inspired by O’Keeffe’s interest in the way cameras register light. The placement of a white marking above the flower’s pistil suggests the appearance of a flame. Deep colors convey a sense of calm. Through her large-scale presentation of something that is easily overlooked, O’Keeffe makes it possible for the viewer to meditate on a flower. As she explained: “Paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to notice it—I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers.”

QUESTIONS

- 1 What point of view is used in this painting? How does it change your perception of the flower?
- 2 How does this painting resemble flowers that you have seen? How does it differ?
- 3 Is there something easily overlooked in your own environment that you would like to paint? What is it?

Beasts of the Sea

1950

by Henri Matisse
(pronounced: Ahn-ree Mah-teas)
(French, 1869–1954)

■ Henri Matisse’s paper collage depicts creatures that we find in the ocean. The descriptive title of this artwork, “The Beasts of the Sea” (in French “les bêtes de la mer”), is at the bottom of the piece, below the orchestrated patches of color and shape. The forms and colors that Matisse used in this work are abstracted from his observations of nature, particularly his memory of the South Pacific islands he had visited twenty years earlier. The bright colors evoke the reflection of light off the surface of the water, and the shapes suggest waves and whirlpools as well as the plants and marine organisms to be found in the deep. Matisse’s use of curved, diagonal, and vertical lines suggests that some creatures are swimming upward, while horizontal lines suggest that others are resting on the ocean floor. The layers of bright colors add to this sense of the ocean’s varied rhythms.

The shapes and colors of *Beasts of the Sea* are formed by pasting colored paper onto the canvas, a technique known as collage. As Matisse aged and found it increasingly difficult to hold a paintbrush and stand in front of an easel, he had his assistants paint white sheets of paper in bright colors. Matisse would then cut the colored sheets into bold shapes, a process he called “cutting into color.” His assistants would arrange the shapes on a canvas with pins, according to Matisse’s directions. When the composition was complete, the pieces were glued down.

QUESTIONS

- 1 How did Matisse use color in this collage? For example, what might the various colors represent?
- 2 Now consider the forms. Imagine what they might be? Seashells? Eels? Seaweed?
- 3 Will you think about the sea differently after having seen this artwork? Explain.

Information

TRANSPORTATION

Metro stops are Judiciary Square (red line), Navy Memorial/Archives (yellow/green line), and Smithsonian (orange/blue line).

Metered street parking is available along the Mall for cars and vans. Buses may let students off at the entrance noted on your confirmation sheet. Parking for buses is allowed on Independence Avenue next to the Washington Monument.

Please check your school tour confirmation letter for the location where your tour will begin. If you are unable to keep this appointment, notify the Tour Scheduler at 202.842.6249 as soon as possible.

LUNCH FACILITIES

Groups may not bring sack lunches. Please note this change in policy.

There are no special lunch facilities for school groups. Groups may purchase their lunches from the full-service cafeteria. Group meal plans can be arranged by calling 202.216.2480.

Restrooms are located by the cafeteria and near main entrances of the Gallery.

WHAT TO BRING

Hand-held cameras, pencils, and pads are allowed in the permanent collection areas, but not in special exhibitions. The use of a tripod, easel, or ink and chalk

drawing materials is prohibited without special advance permission. Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon entering the Gallery. Visitors may not wear backpacks in the galleries; backpacks must be checked or carried by hand. We recommend that students leave their backpacks at school or on the bus to prevent entry delays. For further information on museum visitor policies, please see: <http://www.nga.gov/ginfo/policies.htm>

MUSEUM PUBLICATIONS AND REPRODUCTIONS

Postcards are available in the museum shops for 50 cents each; 11 x 14-inch reproductions are \$5.00 each. Museum shops are located in the East Building Concourse (next to the cafeteria), and on the ground floor of the West Building between the 4th and 6th Street entrances.

ACCESSIBILITY

The 6th Street entrance to the West Building at Constitution Avenue and the 4th Street entrance to the East Building each have ramps to accommodate visitors in wheelchairs. The 6th Street entrance may be used as a drop-off and pick-up location. Please inform your docents prior to your tour of any special needs for your students.

DISCOUNT POLICY AND ORDERING INFORMATION

We are pleased to offer a 20% discount

on postcards, 11 x 14-inch reproductions, large reproductions, and Gallery publications to educational and religious institutions. To receive the discount, orders must be submitted on official letterhead with prepayment or an authorized institutional purchase order (\$50.00 minimum). Your discount is on the merchandise total only—not the shipping and handling fees. Use the total purchase amount before discount to calculate shipping and handling charges.

Orders must be mailed or faxed to the address below:

National Gallery of Art
Gallery Shops Mail Order Department
2000 B South Club Drive
Landover, Maryland 20785
Phone: 800.697.9350 or 202.842.6002
Fax: 202.789.3047

To receive a current list of available reproductions, please call the phone numbers above. All orders are processed within 7 to 10 business days and are shipped via FedEx Ground.

How to Expedite Your Order

- Write your order clearly with full address and a daytime phone number so we can reach you if we have questions.
- Next-day delivery is possible for an additional \$6.00, domestic addresses only.
- If you have any questions, please call us before placing your order.