

## LESSON TWO: Modern Movements



**IMAGE FIVE:** Gustav Klucis. Latvian, 1895–1944. *The Development of Transportation, The Five-Year Plan.* 1929. Gravure, 28  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 19  $\frac{1}{8}$ " (73.3 x 50.5 cm). Purchase Fund, Jan Tschichold Collection



**IMAGE SIX:** Max Beckmann. German, 1884–1950. *Departure.* 1932/1933–35. Oil on canvas, three panels, side panels 7'  $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 39  $\frac{1}{4}$ " (215.3 x 99.7 cm), center panel 7'  $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 45  $\frac{3}{8}$ " (215.3 x 115.2 cm). Given anonymously (by exchange). © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn



**IMAGE SEVEN:** Jacob Lawrence. American, 1917–2000. *The World War had caused a great shortage in Northern industry and also citizens of foreign countries were returning home.* 1940–41. Tempera on gesso on composition board, 12 x 18" (30.5 x 45.7 cm). Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy. © 2007 Jacob Lawrence



**IMAGE EIGHT:** Jacob Lawrence. American, 1917–2000. *Another of the social causes of the migrants' leaving was that at times they did not feel safe, or it was not the best thing to be found on the streets late at night. They were arrested on the slightest provocation.* 1940–41. Tempera on gesso on composition board, 12 x 18" (30.5 x 45.7 cm). Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy. © 2007 Jacob Lawrence



**IMAGE NINE:** Jacob Lawrence. American, 1917–2000. *The railroad stations in the South were crowded with people leaving for the North.* 1940–41. Tempera on gesso on composition board, 12 x 18" (30.5 x 45.7 cm). Gift of Mrs. David M. Levy. © 2007 Jacob Lawrence

## INTRODUCTION

During the interwar years there was an increase in the number of people who migrated and emigrated. Some people were forced to leave their homes for political or religious reasons, and others moved in the hope of a more prosperous life. Also, new developments in technology during and after World War I improved the possibilities for travel, allowing for a greater ease of movement and cultural exchange. Artists were among the people who migrated within one nation or emigrated between nations in search of freedom, hope, or new cultural experiences. This lesson considers how artists reflected upon these physical movements in their artworks and examines the role of narrative in artworks dealing with this theme.

### LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will examine a poster and two paintings and consider how the artists who created these objects reflected upon movement through **subject matter, form, and technique**.
- Students will consider the varying experiences of viewing a **triptych**, a painting cycle, and a design object.
- Students will discuss multipanel artworks in terms of **narrative**.

### INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Tell your students that in this lesson they will discuss works by artists who are concerned in some way with modern movements. Have your students brainstorm the reasons that people today move from house to house, city to city, and country to country, and their modes of movement.
- Ask your students to discuss how the ways people move in their daily lives and over long distances have changed since the interwar period.
- Tell your students that the first image they will view in this lesson is a poster. Ask your students where they most commonly encounter posters. Ask them to describe the types of imagery and messages posters contain and summarize the purpose of posters.
- Ask your students to discuss whether they think that posters can ever be considered works of art. Ask them to explain their ideas with examples.

Tell your students that posters are often seen as representing a meeting point between fine art and utilitarian art, as are many design objects. For this reason the Department of Architecture and Design at The Museum of Modern Art began collecting posters in 1935. The Museum now holds a vast collection of modern posters.

- Show your students the image of *The Development of Transportation, The Five-Year Plan*, by Gustav Klucis (Image Five). Give your students a few minutes to take in the image.
- Have your students work in pairs. Ask each pair of students to describe the message that this poster is communicating. Have each pair share their ideas, supporting them with evidence from the image.

Inform your students that Klucis, the Russian artist who created this poster, was a member of the **Communist Party**, and he participated in the October Revolution, in 1917. In 1929, when Klucis created *The Development of Transportation, The Five-Year Plan*, he was working in Joseph Stalin's regime in the State Publishing House. This poster was part of an official campaign to propagandize the advances being made in transport by Stalin's Five-Year Plan. The Five-Year Plan, implemented in 1928, contained measures to increase the production of steel, iron, and coal and to augment the industrialization of the Soviet Union to match the standards of other nations. The poster was designed to inform the public that due to the modernization of transportation in the Soviet Union, the production, transport, and sale of goods had increased.

- Ask your students how this description of the poster compares with their earlier discussion of the imagery.

- **Have your students consult the timeline they created at the beginning of this guide. How does the imagery in this poster compare with what they know of Stalin’s regime during the late 1920s?**

Tell your students that Klucis, in creating this poster, used a technique known as **photomontage**, in which he created an image by combining photographs, graphic images, and text in one composition. Photomontage was a popular technique for creating posters during the Russian avant-garde movement of the 1920s and 1930s.

- **In keeping with the theme of movement and transportation, ask your students to use photographs, graphic images, and text to create a photomontage that tells the story of a move they experienced or a vacation in another place.**

### IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- **Show your students the image of Max Beckmann’s triptych *Departure* (Image Six). Ask them to describe some of the artwork’s elements.**
- **Beckmann said of this work, “The three [panels] belong together . . . the meaning can only be understood by the three parts together.”<sup>6</sup> Divide your class into three groups. Have each group take one panel of the triptych and create a description of what is happening in the panel, paying particular attention to narrative, composition, and mood.**
- **Have each group present their description of their panel. As a class, discuss the similarities and differences between the panels.**
- **How do the narratives in each of the panels relate to each other and to the overall narrative of the triptych?**

Inform your students that Beckmann was a German artist who briefly participated in World War I, an experience that had a profound effect on him. By the 1920s, museums and private collectors in Germany had begun to collect Beckmann’s artwork, which was very well received. However, when the Nazi party assumed power in Germany in 1933, Beckmann’s work and the work of many other avant-garde artists, including Otto Dix, were removed from public museums in Germany. Beckmann also lost his teaching position at the Städelsche Kunstinstitut (State Art Institute) in Frankfurt and was no longer permitted to exhibit his work in public collections. His paintings were later included in the *Degenerate Art* exhibition, in 1937.

By 1932, a year before the Nazi party censored Beckmann’s work, it was already clear to the artist that he would have to leave Frankfurt to find the safety and seclusion he needed to continue to paint. He found it first in Berlin, then in Amsterdam, and finally in the United States. Beckmann began to paint *Departure* before he left Frankfurt, and he later completed the work in Berlin. Today, the painting is considered to be a reflection of this period of movement in the artist’s life.

- **Ask your students, based on their visual observation of the triptych *Departure* and their knowledge of Beckmann’s story, to speculate why many viewers have suggested that this painting is related to Beckmann’s personal life.**

The artist said that rather than representing one story, *Departure*, like many of his works, speaks to the larger realities of all times and places. To achieve this universality in his work, Beckmann often used symbolic imagery based on mythology. In this way he could express

6. Max Beckmann, quoted in Charles Kessler, *Max Beckmann’s Triptychs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 16.

his view of world issues and the social and political realities of his own time and place. Read your students the following quote by Beckmann, which explains the figures of king, queen, and baby in the central panel of *Departure*:

The King and the Queen have freed themselves, freed themselves of the tortures of life—they have overcome them. The Queen carries the greatest treasure—Freedom—as her child in her lap. Freedom is the one thing that matters—it is departure, the new start.<sup>7</sup>

- **Due to his use of such symbols, it is often very difficult to interpret the narrative in Beckmann’s images. As a class, try to construct a narrative for this triptych that relates to the discussion of the visual elements of the three panels.**

*Departure* communicates one story, yet it is composed of three distinctive parts with their own narratives. Similarly, in *The Migration Series* (Images Seven, Eight, and Nine), American artist Jacob Lawrence tells a story over the course of sixty individual panels.

- **On the board, write the inscriptions that accompany the three panels of *The Migration Series*. Ask your students to copy the inscriptions and consider their meaning. Project images of the three panels and ask your students to match each inscription to an image. Ask your students to explain their reasoning using visual evidence.**
- **Ask your students to identify the themes or visual similarities that connect these three images together.**

Provide your students with the following information about Lawrence and *The Migration Series*. The series is a visual narration of the history of the mass migration of African Americans from southern states to northeastern urban centers, such as New York, Pittsburgh, and Atlantic City, between 1900 and 1930. Lawrence’s own family was part of the migration. As a young child, Lawrence lived in Atlantic City, New Jersey, and Philadelphia, before his family finally settled in Harlem in New York City. In this series, Lawrence visually communicates the realities of this migration process as he had learned about it from listening to the recollections of family, neighbors, friends, and street orators.

There were a number of factors that contributed to the migration of African American people to the North. Many desired to escape the social structure of the South, which, in the early twentieth century, was still very much founded on racial segregation. They also wanted to pursue the better economic and social conditions offered by the industries of northern urban centers and by the railroad. In making this series, Lawrence gave a voice to individuals whose stories had not yet been told.

- **Divide the class into groups of three or four students, and ask each group to choose one of the three panels. Based on their visual analysis of the panel, its inscription, and the information provided about *The Migration Series*, ask your students to develop a hypothesis about the scenes that could directly precede and follow the panel they have chosen. Students must support their hypotheses with visual evidence.**
- **Both Beckmann and Lawrence tell stories of movement in their artworks, and their artworks reflect social realities. Have your students compare and contrast the ways the artists explore movement and social realities in *Departure* and *The Migration Series*. Make sure they support their comparisons and contrasts with examples from the paintings.**

7. Ibid., 16–17.

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. Story-telling through images and words

Introduce your students to a selection of the other twenty-seven panels of *The Migration Series* in MoMA's collection, at [www.moma.org/collection](http://www.moma.org/collection). Explain to your students that there are another thirty panels located in The Phillips Collection, in Washington, D.C. The panels in MoMA's collection narrate the story of the economic hardships and racial injustices that inspired African Americans to leave their homes in the South and migrate in search of more prosperous lives in the North. The panels in The Phillips Collection document the realities of the migrants' newly formed communities in northern urban centers, telling stories of hope and frustration. In narrating this story over sixty panels, Lawrence created an epic; each panel can also be read as an individual painting.

Have your students choose one image from the fifty-seven panels of *The Migration Series* not discussed in detail above. Have each student write a one-page essay describing the panel, summarizing the story it tells, and connecting it to the larger story of *The Migration Series*.

As a class, brainstorm about a time when the students traveled together, inside or outside the school; summarize the overall story and write it on the blackboard. Ask each student to create a three-part image or poem, using either drawings or words, that communicates the different phases of this story. Then ask each student to make a single panel with a short text that reveals where they go after school. In the classroom, create a display of the school-day images and the after-school images, and as a class discuss the diversity of student experiences within and beyond the school.

### 2. The Harlem Renaissance

Inform your students that many poets, writers, and artists lived in Harlem in the 1930s and 1940s, a period that has come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance due to the explosion of cultural and political activity at the time. Have your students research other prominent artists and writers who contributed to the Harlem Renaissance.