

LESSONS

LESSON ONE: A New Way of Looking



IMAGE ONE: Berenice Abbott. American, 1898–1991. *South and DePeyster Streets, Manhattan, November 26, 1935*. 1935. Gelatin silver print, 9 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{7}{16}$ " (23.2 x 19.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the Robert and Joyce Menschel Foundation

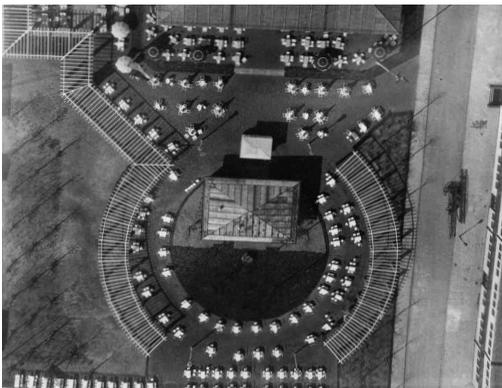


IMAGE THREE: László Moholy-Nagy. American, born Hungary, 1895–1946. *From the Radio Tower, Berlin*. 1928. Gelatin silver print, 13 $\frac{1}{16}$ x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (34.8 x 26 cm). The Museum of Modern Art. Anonymous gift



IMAGE TWO: Berenice Abbott. American, 1898–1991. *Exchange Place, New York*. 1933. Gelatin silver print, 9 $\frac{7}{16}$ x 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ " (23.7 x 6.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Anonymous gift

INTRODUCTION

During the early part of the twentieth century, there were many advances in science and technology that greatly influenced the everyday lives of ordinary people. Cities started to grow and change, responding to technological advances such as the development of the railroad, the introduction of machinery in agricultural practices, the decrease in demand for manual labor, the rise of urban industries, and the placement of factories in suburbs outside the city. In response to these dramatic changes, artists developed new ways of observing and documenting their environments. Berenice Abbott and László Moholy-Nagy were two such artists. Through the **medium** of photography, they invited viewers to question what they saw in images of the built environment. In order to do this, they needed to create a new way of looking at this environment, highlighting things that people might not ordinarily see. One advance that helped in this endeavor was the replacement of early cameras, which were large and bulky objects, with lighter, hand-held versions.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will compare and contrast works of art.
- Students will learn observational techniques.
- Students will become familiar with buildings in their community.
- Students will learn the terms **foreground**, **middle ground**, and **background**, as well as terms for describing objects such as **line**, **color**, **shape**, **form**, and **pattern**.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Introduce the terms **line**, **color**, **shape**, **form**, and **pattern**.
- Have students look out the classroom window and describe what they see. List the words they generate on the board. Have them look out the window again, this time covering one eye. Ask them to discuss how and why the same objects look different.
- Ask students to think about any recent changes that have been made in their neighborhoods. Ask them what impact these projects have had on the neighborhood.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Have your students look carefully at Abbott's *South and DePeyster Streets, Manhattan* and describe what they see, using the vocabulary they have learned.

Abbott spent several years documenting scenes in New York City. This photograph comes from one of her series of works on the subject.

- To help students explain what they are seeing, introduce the terms **foreground**, **middle ground** and **background**: There is a vendor and his cart in the foreground, a tenement building in the middle ground, and a skyscraper in the background. Point out that the size of the buildings changes from foreground to background and that the scene might look different from another **viewpoint**.

- Have students compare the sizes of the buildings in the foreground and the background. The windows in the tenement and the taller building to its left appear to be the same size. Ask them if those windows are the same size in real life. Discuss why or why not.
- Next, have your students look carefully at Abbott's *Exchange Place, New York*.
- Ask students to consider where the photographer was standing when she took this photograph. Have them imagine that Abbott was standing on the top floor of one of the tall buildings. Discuss what that photograph might look like.

In this photograph, Abbott chose to focus on the visual effect that is created when skyscrapers are built close together. The buildings create extremely deep, narrow spaces that resemble canyons, a structure found in natural environments.

- Ask students to describe the view in the image. Have them imagine what it would be like to be in this place. Ask them to describe what they would see and hear.
- Ask them where they think Abbott was standing when she took the photograph.
- Ask students if the viewpoint in this photograph is similar to the viewpoint in the first photograph they looked at. Discuss why or why not.

These photographs were part of a series commissioned from Abbott by the Federal Arts Project, a program that was established by President Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s to provide work for artists during the Depression and to expose the public to art and its importance to society. Abbott worked as a photographer in Paris before moving to New York City. When she first arrived in the United States, she was surprised by the unbelievable wealth and the heartbreaking poverty she saw in the streets of New York, and also by the contrasts created by advances in technology and construction. She saw cars, trains, and trolleys on the streets among horse-drawn milk carts. There were new skyscrapers towering over smaller, more dilapidated buildings.

- Have your students look carefully at Moholy-Nagy's *From the Radio Tower, Berlin*.
- Ask them to describe in detail the lines, shapes, and patterns they see.
- Ask them to imagine where Moholy-Nagy was when he took this photograph. Have them discuss the possibilities with a classmate and report their findings.

Moholy-Nagy stood at the top of a radio tower in Berlin, Germany, to take this photograph in 1928, two years after the tower was built. The tower is approximately 493 feet (150 meters) tall. The viewpoint the photographer used—looking down from a position above everything else—is called an aerial perspective.

- Ask students whether the photograph conveys a sense of height. Discuss why or why not.
- Ask them why they think the artist chose an aerial perspective.

With this approach, Moholy-Nagy has focused our view in a very specific way. Unlike Abbott's photographs, this one illustrates a view from above. The viewpoint forces us to experience the height as if we were actually standing in the same place Moholy-Nagy was when he took the photograph. The result is not only a sense of height, but also a view of what the tower's surroundings look like from above.

- **Have students hold their right hands over their right eyes and look straight ahead. Have them move their hands farther away from their eyes and describe how the size and the shape of the objects they see change as their hands change position. Ask them if the actual size of their hands is changing and what else might explain the illusion.**
- **Have them imagine what it would be like to stand where Moholy-Nagy stood. Ask them what else they think he saw, beyond what is recorded in the photograph.**

In addition to being a photographer, Moholy-Nagy was also a painter and a teacher at the Bauhaus, an art and design school in Germany.

ACTIVITIES

Design Journal

For one week, have your students create a journal to record their experiences of the buildings they use over the course of each day. Have them consider the following:

- **How tall are the buildings?**
- **Do their designs make them stand out from or blend in with the rest of the neighborhood?**
- **What views do they offer from the windows?**
- **What materials are the different buildings made of?**
- **Does the design of each building correspond with its use? Why or why not?**

This journal is meant to record students' personal and individual experiences. Encourage them to make sketches, attach images cut out from magazines and newspapers, and personalize the journal in a way that clearly identifies it as his or her own. These journals can be made very easily with sturdy paper and a stapler, or regular notebooks can be decorated.