



**Project:** Abstracting the Figure **Age Groups:** Elementary through High School

**Goal:** To provide insight into some approaches artists have used to develop abstract images.

**Timing:** 1<sup>st</sup> Session: 20-30 minutes 2<sup>nd</sup> Session: 30-45 minutes

### Materials Session 1

Xerox copies of pictures from the **seeing things differently** section of *Art in the Abstract* at the ISM website ([www.museum.state.il.us](http://www.museum.state.il.us)) for each student (see page 4)

**OR**

Larger, color copies to be held up or placed on a bulletin board for students. (see pages 5-7)

OPTIONAL: Copy of Jan Vermeer's "Young Woman with a Water Jug" See *OPTIONAL INSTRUCTIONS* below.

### Materials Session 2

Magazine (fashion is best but any slick magazine will do)

8 ½ X 11" Tracing paper

#2 pencils

Crayons or markers. We suggest omitting the color black for this project.

8 ½ X 11" Newsprint or other art paper

### Procedure Session 1

*Why do artists choose to make abstract pictures?*

1. Pass out the reproductions (or post them on a board) from the **seeing things differently** section of **Art in the Abstract**.
2. Ask students to look carefully at the picture of **Sally Taylor Smith**.
3. Make a list of the **facts**: She is an old lady. Her clothes are old-fashioned (she lived 150 years ago). She is smiling, etc. You can also make some inferences. She is smiling, maybe she is friendly. She has an expensive brooch - maybe she was well-to-do (Of course, the fact that she was able to have someone make a portrait of her means she probably wasn't poor.)  
*We can see these things because the artist's job here was to make a picture that looked like Sally and he was good at his job.*
4. Now, ask students to look at the **Self Portrait in Green** by Gertrude Abercrombie. Tell students that a self-portrait is a picture that artists make of themselves.
5. Make some comparisons between Sally Taylor Smith and Gertrude's Self-Portrait. Again – deal with **facts** only: She is in modern dress. Her hands are folded. Her eyes are blank, etc.
6. Ask, "Does Gertrude look as friendly as Sally?" Why or why not?
7. *Gertrude's portrait communicates a certain distance through the abstract qualities she has chosen to emphasize: The surfaces appear smooth, as if carved of stone. The figure seems very still. The face looks like a mask. It does not look at the viewer, but away and down. There are no eyes painted in the blank sockets. All of these clues suggest that Gertrude saw herself as moving outside "normal" social groups. The purpose of this image was to show the world what Gertrude thought of herself.*
8. Now ask students to look closely at the image of **Figure by the Window** by Manierre Dawson.
9. Make a list of the facts of what they see: There is a square that looks like it might be a window to the left. In the center of the image there is a face shaped form with what looks like it might be hair. There are lines all over the place. It may remind them of a jigsaw puzzle.
10. Ask the class to compare this picture to Gertrude Abercrombie's Self Portrait. What are some of the differences? (There is no recognizable human figure - "It doesn't look like a person." There are lots of lines and different shapes.)
11. Which of the two seems to have the most movement? The Dawson piece, with its many diagonal and overlapping forms seems to be moving all over the place.
12. *Manierre Dawson was recently married when he painted this picture. It may have been painted to represent the happiness he felt in beginning a family.*

### OPTIONAL INSTRUCTIONS

Sometimes artists like to use other artist's works as a starting point for their art. Some people think that Manierre Dawson used the painting of a Dutch artist as a starting point for his **Figure by the Window**. Jan Vermeer's **Young Woman with a Water Jug** (1662) can be found at the Web Gallery of Art (<http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>) by clicking on the letter "V" in the alphabetical index, searching for *Vermeer van Delft, Jan* and then clicking on "Paintings between 1661-1670." Scroll down to the second image.

Show students the picture of the Vermeer painting. What is similar to the Dawson? What is different? Ask your students if they think Dawson used the Vermeer to begin his composition. Why or why not? Is it okay for an artist to copy another artist's work? Why or why not?



## Page 2

### Project: Abstracting the Figure - Day 2

#### Procedure Session 2

*By beginning with a realistic image and processing it through several steps students develop an understanding of some of the techniques artists use to create abstract imagery.*

##### Preparation:

Each student should bring in either a magazine or a large photograph of a person from a magazine (cover shot, make-up advertisement, etc)

Hand out tracing paper and pencils.

1. Remind students of the previous day's discussion: *Artists choose to make abstract pictures for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it might be to tell something about themselves; sometimes it might be to show emotion. There can be many other reasons, too. Abstract pictures often begin with realistic pictures.*  
Tell the class they will be using one way that artists use to make abstract pictures today.
2. Have the students write their name on the back of the magazine picture. Then, place the tracing paper over the magazine picture. Ask them to use their pencil to trace 3 parts of the face (it could be the nose, an eye, the mouth). Ask them to trace the outline of the face.
3. Tell them to shift their tracing paper a little on the page- up, down, to the side - it doesn't matter. Now, trace three other features (the other eye, perhaps the ear, maybe the outline of the hair or the neck).
4. Tell them to shift the tracing paper again and trace the same lines (nose, eye, etc) as they did in instruction #2 but add the shoulders and any details of clothing they find interesting. These will be line only, no shading.
5. Ask students to set aside the magazine image.
6. Tell them to take out the piece of newsprint or drawing paper. Write their name on the back. Ask them to turn their tracing paper *face down* on to the new piece of paper. Tell them to carefully trace the lines they see through the paper. Ask them to push down hard. The original pencil lines should transfer to the new piece of paper. Once they have transferred their drawing they can discard the tracing paper.
7. Ask them to look at their page. If they want, they can join some of the lines together. Use crayons and/or markers to color the design in any way they wish. Ideally, the entire page should be colored.

*Finished artwork should be presented as a comparison between each original image (the magazine photo) and the student's abstraction of it.*

#### **Color**

Abstract artists use a variety of strategies as they choose color for their paintings. Here are three approaches your students may wish to consider before they add color to their drawing.

##### **Local Color**

Artists might use some of the color that is actually present in their subject matter as a beginning for their color choice. For instance, in Manierre Dawson's painting, **Figure by the Window**, the upper torso and head of the figure are painted a pink that is close to Caucasian flesh color. The figure's hair is painted yellow, as if she might have had blonde hair. *Students can use the colors found in the photograph as references for their color choices.*

##### **Emotional Color**

Sometimes artists use colors as stand-in symbolism for emotion. A bright red might mean anger, a cool blue might indicate sadness. Gertrude Abercrombie's *Self-Portrait in Green* has been painted entirely with colors that are completely in the cool range of blues, greens, and grays. This color choice furthers the sense of distance in the personality of the sitter. *Ask students how they feel about doing this project. Have them choose colors that symbolize their emotions.*

##### **Arbitrary Color**

Arbitrary color choices might be part of a program, ie: variations on blues, or chosen by chance (close your eyes and choose a color) or by whatever colors are available to the artist.



## Page 3

**Project:** Abstracting the Figure - Illinois State Board of Education Goals and Standards

### Illinois State Board of Education Goals and Standards

Students completing this project will address elements of the following I.S.B.E. Goals and Standards for the **FINE ARTS**:

#### Early High School

*25.B.4 Analyze and evaluate similar and distinctive characteristics of works in two or more of the arts that share the same historical period or societal context.*

By comparing and contrasting the three portraits of women from different periods and with different styles students will become aware that the visual arts are not static.

#### Late High School

*26.B.5 Common for all four arts Create and perform a complex work of art using a variety of techniques, technologies and resources and independent decision making.*

The project will provide insight into some approaches utilized by abstract artists. Independent students may wish to build on this knowledge by creating a series of abstract works.

#### Early High School

*27.B.4a Analyze and classify the distinguishing characteristics of historical and contemporary art works by style, period and culture.*

*27.B.4b Understand how the arts change in response to changes in society.*

#### Late High School

*27.B.5 Analyze how the arts shape and reflect ideas, issues or themes in a particular culture or historical period.*

By referring to the interactive timeline and '–isms' charts on the **Art in the Abstract** web-presentation, students will begin to place the works included in **Art in the Abstract** into the flow of both social history and the history of art.

### Social Sciences

In addition, students who complete this project will address elements of the Goals and Standards for the **SOCIAL SCIENCES**.

### STATE GOAL 18: Understand social systems, with an emphasis on the United States

A. Compare characteristics of culture as reflected in language, literature, the arts, traditions and institutions.

#### Middle/Junior High School

*18.A.3 Explain how language, literature, the arts, architecture and traditions contribute to the development and transmission of culture.*

#### Early High School

*18.A.4 Analyze the influence of cultural factors including customs, traditions, language, media, art and architecture in developing pluralistic societies.*





**Portrait of Sally Taylor Smith ca. 1850-60**

Adalbert Wunder [b. 1827: Berlin, Germany – d. unknown]

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Fredrick Schneider

Collection of the Illinois State Museum





**Self-Portrait in Green 1938**

Gertrude Abercrombie [b. 1909: Austin, Texas – d. 1977: Chicago, Illinois]  
oil on canvas

Gift of the Estate of Gertrude Abercrombie  
Collection of the Illinois State Museum



**Figure by the Window 1915**

Manierre Dawson [b.1887: Chicago, Illinois – d. 1969 Sarasota, Florida]

oil on canvas

Gift of Dr. Lewis Obi, Frank McKeown and Lefferts Mabie

Collection of the Illinois State Museum



**Art in the Abstract Exhibition**  
'seeing things differently' section  
Illinois State Museum Lockport Gallery  
October 30, 2004 - March 4, 2005

Installation photograph