

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF WESTERN ART

THE ANSCHUTZ COLLECTION

Musicality through Abstraction



John Marin, *Blue Sky, Mountain Aspens, and the Roaring Hondo*, 1930



Emil Bisttram, *Syncopated Rhythm, No. 2*, no date

Background Information

America was first introduced to Modernism in a big international exhibition, the Armory Show, held in New York City in 1913. Challenging the notion that art must realistically depict the world, many artists experimented with the expressive use of color, non-traditional materials, and new techniques and mediums. Artists and the public were blown away by their first introduction to modern artistic styles, such as Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, and Abstraction. Descriptions of these colorful and dynamic styles quickly spread to the West. As the West began to change after the turn of the 20th century, artists also changed the way they represented it and many chose to embrace modern styles.

Many Modernist artists, including Emil Bisttram and John Marin, used music as inspiration to create abstract paintings. Artists listen to a range of musical styles for inspiration and enjoyment. Whether it's a historic composition or a contemporary recording, music can provide harmony, color inspiration, and perspective. Just like in a ballet, music and art can tell a story.

Look Closer

Look carefully at the artworks by John Marin and Emil Bisttram, artists who both listened to music as they created art. As you compare the two artworks, notice their different styles, techniques and inspirations for creating abstract art and consider how emotions and distortion of expressive features influenced each artist's composition. Explore how musical rhythm can translate to visual rhythm and compare the ways in which musicians and visual artists express emotion through abstraction.



John Marin, *Blue Sky, Mountain Aspens, and the Roaring Hondo*, 1930

John Marin was a modernist who incorporated elements of Cubism, Futurism, Fauvism, Abstraction, and Impressionism in his composition. He is credited as a precursor to the modernist style Abstract Expressionism, and participated in the Armory Show in 1913. Look carefully at the river and notice the different directions and styles of lines he used. Dry brush (1) is used as well as wet (2), and the dynamic between the two (differences in technique and paint application) is what adds the rough element to watercolor, which is oftentimes seen as a very smooth and precise medium (3).

Look at the violent thrashing water in the foreground (4). As you peer farther into the painting, the calmer the water appears, and likewise, the softer and more even Marin's use of color and application of paint (5).

Marin has placed smooth paint next to roughly applied dry paint and used discordant colors like mustard yellow against a blue/green (6), and patches of indigo next to umber (7), to cause friction and echo the energy of the rushing water. Additionally, Marin has drawn attention to negative space by leaving untouched watercolor paper (8) (9) (10) next to the bright colors of paint.

“While these powers are at work pushing, pulling, sideways, downwards, upwards, I can hear the sound of their strife and there is great music being played... Within the frames there must be a balance, a controlling of these warring, pushing, pulling forces.”

—John Marin, 1912



Emil Bisttram, *Syncopated Rhythm, No. 2*, no date

Look closely at this painting and identify what colors are used. What are the predominant colors (1)? The artist also applied lighter, pastel colors in the background (2). Notice the areas where the artist has left some of the color roughly applied so the paper shows through (negative space) (3). Then look for areas where the artist has blended more than one color together to create a softer effect (4) (5). Look at the variety of lines in the drawing and see if you can identify straight, wavy, dark, and light lines.

Bisttram has titled this painting *Syncopated Rhythm*. In music syncopation involves a variety of rhythms that are in some ways unexpected, as they make part or all of the tune off-beat. More simply, syncopation is a disturbance or interruption of the melody. How does this painting appear to be syncopated? Can you identify particular passages or areas in the painting where the melody or overall composition has been interrupted?

Emil Bisttram said of this work, *Syncopated Rhythm No. 2*: “In this study my intention was to express the idea that musical rhythms are in time with painting rhythms. I also want you to notice that the composition is moving from lower left to upper right, which in the artistic language is called the lyric direction. It’s a cheerful and happy direction. If this same composition were moving from the upper left to lower right, it would have a dramatic or sad or bitter feeling. It would be ominous and very dramatic. Therefore, that is the purpose of making this composition move from left to right. The color you will notice is red. I left

it that way because I've tried a number of colors and I felt that this one expressed the idea of this particular composition best. Use your own imagination and see if you can feel and sense the same kind of rhythm I have felt in using the words 'Syncopated rhythms.'”

Discussion Questions

- What types of music might inspire an artist to create an artwork?
- What does visual rhythm look like?
- How can music be represented as a visual image?
- What are some emotions that can be expressed in a visual composition?
- What expressive features can you find in an artwork?

Activity

Warm up: Take about 5-10 minutes to do a quick media selection and stream of conscious drawing while listening to clips of music.

Minute media: Play a clip of a song for thirty seconds to a minute. For the first few clips, ask students to sit and listen to the full clip before choosing a medium that they feel is best matched to the music. Discuss how or why the sound or style of music influenced their choice. Did they choose black and white over color? Clay instead of charcoal? Each medium has its own unique sensory and emotional attributes, just like the music you've played.

Quick draw: Continue to play subsequent clips of music, and ask students to sketch an emotional response to what they're hearing using whatever medium they'd like. Each clip of music should play for about thirty seconds to a minute at first, and then you can lengthen the time clips are played as students get into the groove. The music can be anything you choose, or you can play AMWA's selections listed below. You can also invite students to choose their own music.

John Marin was an improvisational piano player, and saw his artwork as being inextricably linked to music. He may have listened to contemporary tunes like this:

Allen Toussaint, *Viper's Drag*

The titles and writings Emil Bisttram gave to his pieces often refer to inspiration from sound or music. There are also a few that can visually be associated with instruments or musical symbols. He often listened to Mozart while he painted. We've included Stevie Wonder on this playlist since it demonstrates syncopated rhythm.

Mozart, *Symphony No. 41 in C Major, K. 551 "Jupiter": IV. Molto allegro*

Stevie Wonder, *Superstition*

Harry Belafonte, *Jump in the Line (Shake, Senora)*

Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, *Summertime*
Metallica, *Master of Puppets*
Claude Debussy, *Suite bergamasque: Clair de Lune*
Mighty Mighty Bosstones, *Somebody I Suppose*
Phillip Glass, *Opening*
Woody Guthrie, *Ramblin' Round*
John Cage, *Four Walls: Act I, Scene 1*
The Animals, *Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood*
Beethoven, *Sonata No. 14 "Moonlight" in C-Sharp Minor*, *Op. 27 No. 2 I. Adagio sostenuto*
Richard Wagner, *Die Walkure, Act III: Ride of the Valkyries*
Sex Pistols, *God Save the Queen*

Notice the variety of musical styles represented in the list above or in your students' requests. Have a conversation around how or why each particular song prompted a particular emotional response, a particular color, or a particular medium. Abstract art is at its root an expressive, emotionally inspired style of art. Likewise, music serves as inspiration and expression in our interpretation of the world around us. Artists often distort expressive features such as line, shape, color, and space to manipulate their viewers' interpretation. Just as Bisttram and Marin have in the past, have students use their sketches to create and invent their own Abstract art project using music as inspiration.

Materials:

A variety of artistic mediums for student choice, such as paper, pencils, colored pencils, crayons, markers, watercolors, charcoal, clay, scissors, glue, etc.
Online music subscription, CDs, or another way to play music in the classroom

Resources

Art Institute of Chicago Feature on John Marin's Watercolors:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ah6eLUsDvmg>

Smithsonian Institution's Year of Music:

<https://music.si.edu/>

https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/what-is-modern-art/

Downloads

[Musicality through Abstraction Playlist PDF](#)

Spotify Playlist: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/65Gye0pRTRGgwwcmbeOcak>