

LESSON PLAN:

Decoding Abstract Art

Thinking about the possible meanings of abstract painting can be fun—it’s like a puzzle or mystery. In this lesson, students will study an abstract painting carefully, consider how abstraction is part of daily life, and create their own abstract drawings.

Objectives:

Student will...

- Carefully study an abstract painting
- Practice making abstract drawings
- Demonstrate academic talk in the discussion
- Make personal connections to visual art and their experiences

Grade level:

K–12

Duration:

30–60 minutes depending on age group and educator interest

Materials:

- Students should view a large print or projection of *Ellipse* by Ilya Bolotowsky (UMFA1981.029)
- Laminated pictures of realistic scenes, animals, people (sample images attached). If there are not enough for all students, teachers should plan enough time to share among table groups
- 5+ pieces of tracing paper per student
- Pencils, colored pencils, other illustration materials, as desired

Vocabulary/Key Terms:

- Abstract art does not try to represent realistic visual images; instead, artists use shapes, colors, and other markings to achieve their desired effect
- Modern art refers to a period from the late 1800s to the 1970s when artists were focused on experimentation, questioning the purpose of art, and trying new techniques including those driven by new technology
- Neoplasticism: see artist biography above
- Decoding: converting symbols into possible meanings using language

Activity

First, show students the image of *Ellipse* using a high quality print or projection. Engage students in academic talk, considering questions like:

- Do these sizes and shapes balance? Why or why not?
- How many shapes can you see in this artwork?
- What would happen if you moved one of the shapes or changed a color?
- Why do you think the artist chose these shapes and colors?

As students express ideas about the purpose of shapes and colors you can shift to abstraction:

- If I decided to make an artwork about friendship, I might try to show two friends doing an activity together. How might you show friendship in artwork? How might this artist, Ilya Bolotowsky, show friendship using shape, color, and line?

Abstract art is sometimes created when artists use line, shape and color to depict something they see, experience, or remember. We are going to try taking something that is realistic and making it abstract.

Teachers should distribute laminated examples of realistic images to students/ table groups and briefly discuss what the images depict. Students should:

- Place tracing paper over the image and create a more abstract version with a pencil, picking only some of the most important shapes or ideas to trace.
- Students can repeat this with their five pieces of tracing paper trying different strategies, or different images from the table.

After completing the first activity, students should choose one drawing that resonates the most with them, adding color using pastels, color sticks, or colored pencils.

Activity cont.

Conclude with a Gallery Stroll of projects and engage in further academic talk:

- Can you tell what any of these were intended to depict?
- As you drew, did you stay true to the realistic image or did you develop new ideas about what you were creating?
- Does this change how you think about Bolotowsky's *Ellipse*? Why or why not?

Methods for Assessment

Teachers will know a student was successful when:

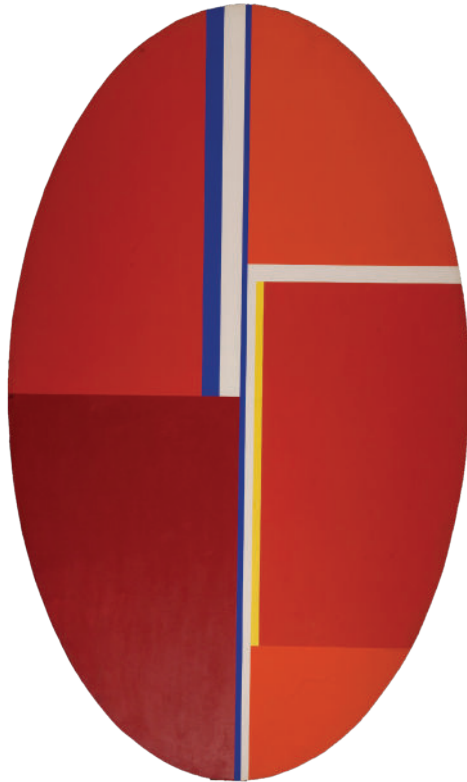
- They contributed positively to the discussion by offering feedback and/or listening and responding to peers
- They produced five abstract drawings and developed one idea to some stage of completion

Teachers will know a student is approaching a successful lesson when:

- They strived to participate either by speaking or listening
- They produced some of the drawings and attempted to develop one idea

Teachers will know a student was not successful if they were not able to participate in a majority of the lesson.

Additional Resources



Artwork Spotlight:

Ilya Bolotowsky (Russian American, 1907–1981), *Ellipse*, 1980, acrylic on canvas. Purchased with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and Friends of the Art Museum, UMFA1981.029

- Ilya Bolotowsky was born in Petrograd, Russia in 1907 and died in New York City in 1981. Bolotowsky saw paintings by Mondrian in 1933 in the Gallatin Collection at New York University and was influenced by the de Stijl philosophy of neoplasticism where art emphasized abstraction and simplification without an illusion of space. Bolotowsky wrote of his style in 1969: "I work in the neo-plastic style because for me it is the most meaningful and exciting direction in art. As a neo-plasticist, I strive after an ideal of harmony. Neo-plasticism can achieve unequalled tension, equilibrium, and harmony through the relationship of the vertical and horizontal elements."

Additional Resources cont.

- More on the benefits on academic talk and group discussion:
<https://www.edutopia.org/video/supporting-academic-talk-among-students/>
- ELA Standards: 3-6SL.1-3, 3-6W.3,
- Visual Arts core standards: 3-6.V.CR.1-3, 3-6.V.R.1-3

This lesson was created for the UMFA's Global Contemporary Gallery (2026), using resources from the 1996 Abstract and Modern Art Lessons created for Evening for Educators.

