

LESSON PLAN:

Emotional Arrangement

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This lesson introduces middle-grade students to abstract expressionism where color and shape are considered as powerful as other images and symbols. Students will explore whether the colors and shapes are linked to any emotional qualities, and create their own abstract expressionist works with cut paper.

Objectives:

Student will...

- Identify elements of art and artistic principles
- Discuss the emotional image of abstract arrangements
- Create personal variations of this composition
- Make individual abstract expressionist compositions

Grade level:

3–4

Duration:

30–60 minutes depending on age group and educator intent

Materials:

- Students should view a large print or projection of *Jasmine Sidewinder #91* by Gene Davis (UMFA1973.044)
- Construction paper (ideally Color Aid paper) closely matching the colors in Davis' composition and cut in proportionally sized strips. Students can make measurements and cut strips for skillbuilding, if desired.
- Painter's tape to hang strips on a whiteboard or classroom wall
- Additional cut paper in a variety of colors
- Gluestick to assemble final compositions

Vocabulary/Key Terms:

- 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
- Abstract art does not try to represent realistic visual images; instead, artists use shapes, colors, and other markings to achieve their desired effect
- Abstract expressionism is an art movement that followed World War II through the 1950s. Art during this period tends to be large, non-representational, and commonly focuses on the process of painting itself. Abstract expressionists felt this style was as powerful at depicting emotions and feelings without using recognizable images.
- Decoding: converting symbols into possible meanings using language

Activity

First introduce students to abstract expressionism, a movement where artists felt the elements of art – specifically color and shape – could be as powerful as familiar images and symbols. Davis believed that color, line, and geometric shapes had as much expressive value as pictorial artwork.

Consider questions that begin a dialogue:

- What colors and shapes do you see in *Jasmine Sidewinder #91*?
- Do the images repeat? Is there a pattern or rhythm?
- If you were to guess, what emotional qualities do you think this piece is expressing? As the color changes to lighter or darker shades, does that make a difference in what you see?

On the whiteboard, the teacher will invite individual students to contribute to attempts to create Davis' design using the previously cut paper. Questions to consider:

- Was it difficult to create a design in this way?
- Does going through this process make you think differently about Davis' work? Why or why not?

Next, students will take turns with another stack of the cut paper, rearranging the strips so they are different from *Jasmine Sidewinder*. Questions to consider:

- Did rearranging the paper change the final image?
- How are the images similar or different?
- Does the version we collaboratively created express different emotional ideas?

Activity cont.

At tables, students can use any colored paper to create their own design. Encourage students to rearrange their paper two or three times before deciding what pattern to glue to their paper. Conclude by allowing interested students to share what they created and an idea they were trying to express. The audience can share if they felt similarly or differently about the artwork. If many students are eager to share (or time is short) do a quick Gallery Stroll to view peer projects.

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 productively used the materials to create a collaborative version of *Jasmine Sidewinder* and their own composition

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

- They strived to participate either by speaking or listening
- They strived to use materials appropriately to create a collaborative version of *Jasmine Sidewinder* and their own composition

Teachers will know a student was not successful if they were not able to participate in the discussion or use materials appropriately.



Artwork Spotlight:

Gene Davis (American, 1920–1985), *Jasmine Sidewinder #91*, 1969, acrylic on canvas. Purchased with funds from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Associated Students of the University of Utah, Mrs. Paul L. Wattis, Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Warshaw, and Friends of the Art Museum, UMFA1973.044

- Gene Davis (1904–1997) was born in Washington D.C. in 1920 and died there in 1985. Davis' first career was in the media, working as a White House correspondent, reporter, and sportswriter for various newspapers. In the 1960s, Davis was part of the Washington Color School, which delved into and simplified the most elemental aspects of painting—color, space, and line. His use of line is what Davis is best known for, with paintings that frequently have stripes of fluctuating width, color, and pattern. Davis also connected his paintings to music, especially jazz. Some viewers think the lines and intervals represent the cadence and rhythm of jazz music. The name “Post-Painterly Abstraction” was given to this style in an exhibition curated by famous art critic, Clement Greenberg, in his 1964 exhibition.

Additional Resources cont.

- More on the benefits on academic talk and group discussion:
<https://www.edutopia.org/video/supporting-academic-talk-among-students/>
- b. 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 2004 Abstract Art Lesson developed by Andrea Heidinger

