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Visit guide  
for teachers

## The American Dream pop to the present

9 March – 18 June 2017



Edward Ruscha (b. 1937),  
*Standard Station*.  
Screenprint, 1966. The  
Museum of Modern Art,  
New York/Scala, Florence.  
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## Planning your visit

Provide a focus for students to keep in mind as they explore the exhibition and which you can follow up afterwards.

- Do some preparatory work in school to develop the focus of the visit and familiarise students with the content of the exhibition
- Allow students some scope to explore and find objects that interest them

### Curriculum Links

The exhibition offers opportunities in the following curriculum areas and for cross-curricular work:

**History:** JFK, consumerism, American Dream, racism, segregation, civil rights movement, protest, African-American history, feminism, equal rights

**Art and Design:** Modern and contemporary artists, pop art, abstract expressionism, minimalism, conceptualism, photorealism, inspiration, print-making, colour, tone, line, shape, materials

**PSHE and Citizenship:** Democracy, diverse identities, mutual respect and understanding, rights and freedoms, citizen action, interest groups



Robert Bechtle, *Alameda Camaro*, 1967.

## Using this resource

This resource is designed to support your visit to the *The American Dream: pop to the present* exhibition.

It offers opportunities to work the exhibition into learning across the curriculum. To accompany this resource there is a downloadable powerpoint image bank and a set of worksheets that can be adapted to suit the needs of your students.

## Introduction to the exhibition

Starting with the explosion of pop art the 1960s, the exhibition includes works by the most celebrated American artists. From Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg to Ed Ruscha, Kara Walker and Julie Mehretu – all boldly experimented with printmaking.

Taking inspiration from the world around them – billboard advertising, global politics, Hollywood and household objects – American artists created highly original prints to rival their paintings and sculptures. Printmaking brought their work to a much wider and more diverse audience.

The sheer inventiveness and technical ingenuity of their prints reflects America's power and influence during this period. Many of these works also address the deep divisions in society that continue to resonate with us today – there are as many American dreams as there are Americans.

## Using the exhibition

### In advance

Decide on a focus for the visit and a follow up activity.

Use the image bank to familiarise students with some of the exhibition content. Download and adapt worksheets to meet your needs. Go through exhibition activities with the students and accompanying adults beforehand.

### **On the day**

Encourage adults to allow students to linger at prints which interest them and to discuss what they see and share ideas as they go round. Remind students to behave calmly and politely. Photography is not allowed in the exhibition, but students may take photographs in the Museum's permanent galleries.

### **Afterwards**

Use what the students have gathered in the exhibition/Museum galleries for follow up activities back at school.

## **The 'big' questions**

Pose a big question for students to keep in mind during their visit to the exhibition. Here are some possible examples:

- Which did I think, and why, was the most interesting print in the exhibition?
- What did I learn about American art movements that I did not know before?
- What sources of evidence did the exhibition include and how useful did I find these for learning about America's past?
- How can contemporary art be used to understand social or political issues?
- How can we learn about artistic technique by looking at the prints?

## **Exhibition themes**

### **Pop art**

The artists Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, James Rosenquist and Claes Oldenburg were fascinated by American consumerism, mass media and advertising. Broadly grouped as 'pop artists', their work was a radical departure from abstract expressionism, the avant-garde style of spontaneous gesture dominant since the late 1940s. Using screenprint and other techniques associated with commercial printing, pop artists blurred lines between fine and commercial art.

### **Three giants of printmaking:**

#### **Johns, Rauschenberg, Dine**

In the early 1960s, the painters Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Jim Dine all began to experiment with printmaking. Finding the creative possibilities of the medium exciting and rewarding, they each went on to produce a large body of technically complex and ambitious work. Working closely with printers at various workshops, they have repeatedly pushed the boundaries of printmaking to new levels.

### **Made in California: the West Coast experience**

While the work of New York pop artists often expressed a frenetic anxiety, a cooler, more laid-back aesthetic developed on the West Coast. Ed Ruscha chronicled the LA lifestyle and landscape: swimming pools, freshly squeezed oranges, billboards and road signs. Drawing inspiration from vernacular architecture, signage and advertising, he wryly depicted a world of leisure in which the car reigned.

In northern California Wayne Thiebaud made still lifes of confectionery laid out in seductive rows lit by the sun. The tree-lined avenues of Robert Bechtle's quiet neighbourhoods, with their status-symbol cars and tidy apartments, offer a conventional view of the good life. Sharing Ruscha's interest in language, Bruce Nauman made unsettling word-images that hint at a darker side of the American Dream.

### **Persistence of abstraction: gestural and hard-edge**

Despite the arrival of pop art in the early 1960s, abstract expressionism, the dominant avant-garde style since the 1940s, continued to influence American artists into the 1970s. Lithography was particularly well-suited to the impulsive and gestural mark making of the abstract expressionists, from Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell to Cy Twombly and Sam Francis.

In contrast, Ellsworth Kelly and Frank Stella rejected gestural abstraction during the 1960s in favour of hard-edge geometric shapes and simplified forms. Both were influenced by the German émigré Josef Albers and his teaching in America of the principles of Bauhaus design – impersonal, clean, minimal lines and symmetry.

### **Minimalism and conceptualism from the 1970s**

Reacting against the personal mark making of abstract expressionism and the irony of pop art, minimalism and conceptualism emerged as two distinct yet related strands of thought. Minimalists sought to pare down colour, form, texture and material to their essence, while conceptualists valued the idea behind a work over its execution.

For minimalist artists such as Brice Marden and Donald Judd, printmaking was the ideal medium to explore the expressive potential of the grid. Sol LeWitt, Judd, Edda Renouf and Jennifer Bartlett also used printmaking to investigate a theme and its variations within a series. Other artists, including Richard Serra and Marden, examined scale and proportion.

### **Photorealism: portraits and landscapes**

Photorealism developed in America towards the end of the 1960s, partly in reaction to abstraction and minimalism. The style is characterised by highly detailed images presented with detached objectivity and the shallow depth of field of the artists' source photographs.

Several photorealist painters took up the creative possibilities of printmaking. Chuck Close and Alex Katz applied the monumental scale and two-dimensionality of abstract art to their portraiture, then a deeply unfashionable genre. Composed within a grid structure, Richard Estes's uncanny urban landscapes are devoid of people. Also empty of human presence are the vast night skies and ocean wastes of Vija Celmins' prints, which dissolve into abstraction.

### **The Figure Reasserted**

In the late 1960s the abstract expressionist painter Philip Guston departed abruptly from his gestural style. He began to create cartoonish images of hooded figures, dismembered limbs and other representational forms. A decade earlier Richard Diebenkorn had abandoned abstraction in favour of the human figure, still lifes and recognizable landscapes. Philip Pearlstein also started to work from life, producing nude figure paintings from the early 1960s.

The rejection of abstraction in favour of a more representational approach led to the rise of figurative expressionism among a new generation of American painters from the late 1970s and 80s. In printmaking, artists such as Robert Longo and Susan Rothenberg created psychologically charged images of the human figure.

### **Politics and dissent**

In America the 1960s began with the election of a young, dynamic president who promised to put men on the moon by the end of the decade. On 22 November 1963, John F. Kennedy was assassinated. In the following decades the United States has experienced war, the AIDS crisis, terrorist attack and economic downturn. Artists have responded to these issues and events directly, often critically.

Printmaking has been used as a medium for political comment since the invention of the printing press. Modern commercial techniques, such as screenprint and offset lithography, have been exploited by activist groups like the Guerrilla Girls and the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) to raise consciousness and disseminate political messages.

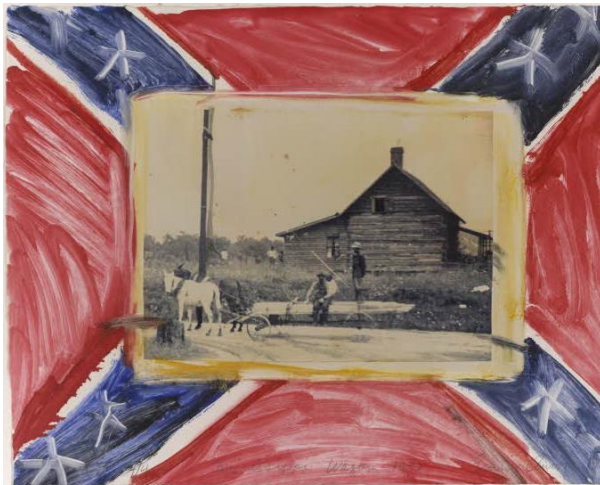
### **HIV/AIDS**

In the mid-1980s, cases of HIV/AIDS began to increase at an alarming rate in America. The spread of the immune-suppressing virus was especially rapid in cities with large gay communities, such as New York, San Francisco and Houston. Many believed that the epidemic was exacerbated by the slowness of the US Federal Government to take action. Groups such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) were formed to protest against the prohibitively high cost of medicine, the lack of an effective awareness-raising campaign and the stigmatization of those with the disease. Many artists were involved, including Keith Haring and David Wojnarowicz, both of whom died from AIDS-related illnesses.

### **Feminism, gender and the body**

The rise of feminism in the 1960s and 70s challenged traditional male power structures in America. Artists began to address feminist themes, such as female sexuality, reproductive rights and the domestic role of women.

Galvanized by gender inequality in the art world, women artists began to form groups in the early 1970s. Printmakers such as May Stevens and Dotty Attie showed their work in non-profit, co-operative galleries set up to provide an alternative to the male-dominated commercial art scene. In the 1980s, the work of artists as diverse as Louise Bourgeois and Kiki Smith questioned the traditional ways that the female body had been represented and objectified.



Emma Amos, *Mississippi Wagon*, 1937.

### **Race and identity: unresolved histories**

The growing civil rights movement led by the Baptist minister Martin Luther King, Jr. from the mid-1950s met with hostile, often violent, reaction. This was particularly the case in the Southern states, where segregation in public places was enshrined in law until 1964, when Congress passed the Civil Rights Act.

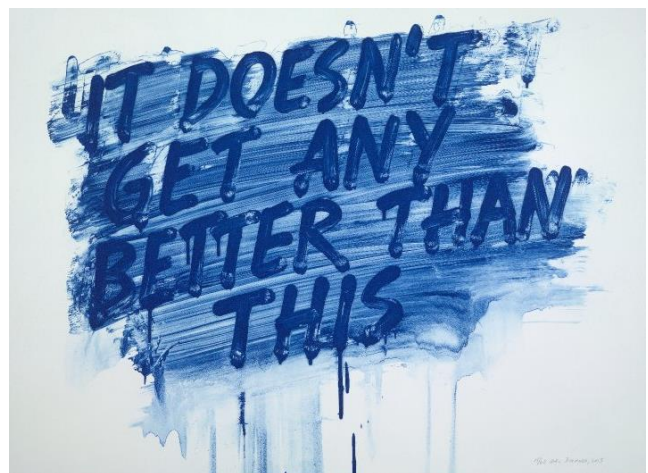
In the 1960s and 70s few artists of colour were able to penetrate America's mainstream art world. In recent years, the legacy of slavery has preoccupied the African-American artists Emma Amos, Kara Walker and Willie Cole. Glenn Ligon has drawn on literature to create text-based works on race and identity. As divisions persist in

American society, the work of these artists continues to challenge inequalities and make visible the scars of history.

### **Signs of the times**

If the American Dream depends on prosperity, the new millennium has witnessed its partial eclipse. Economic slowdown has meant that home ownership, stable employment and college education have become unobtainable for many. This has added to a general feeling of insecurity in a nation still recovering from the attacks on 11 September 2001.

Ed Ruscha, Mel Bochner and Julie Mehretu reflect on a changing nation in a globalised world. Ruscha and Bochner address the fading American Dream, while Mehretu offers a more oblique commentary on contemporary America. The pulsating lines of her etchings evoke a nation in flux, responding, shifting, and adapting to new circumstances.



Mel Bochner, *It Doesn't Get Any Better Than This*, 2013.

## Curricular opportunities in 12 objects.

12 prints that you can explore to complement Art and Design, History, and PSHE and Citizenship with suggested activities. Each print can be used to teach across the subjects above.

### Art and Design

- Look at the way that the artists have composed their work. Think about the use of line, shape, colour and tone, and the positioning of lettering and human forms. Print out some examples and annotate them.
- Some of the American artists who were creating the prints were responding to important social issues like racism and sexism. If you were creating a piece inspired by issues in British society, what would those issues be and what kind of artwork would you produce? Plan out an idea for a project.
- The artists in the exhibition used a variety of artistic approaches and techniques to interpret their subject. Compare four of the prints in the powerpoint and describe the differences between them.

### History

- How do the artists in the exhibition represent key events, changes and issues in America's past or present? What sources of evidence do they reference to do this?
- New York pop art and the work of the West Coast artists responded to post-war growth, mass-production, advertising and a relaxed, luxury lifestyle. Use the prints to explore and discuss consumerism and the American Dream in the 1960s.
- To what extent do the prints help us to understand protest movements and activism in America since the 1950s?

### PSHE and Citizenship

- Look at the work of Ruscha, Bechtle, Bosman and Amos. Do you think that the artworks in the exhibition inspire or challenge pride in the American way of life?

- Fast cars, celebrity and equality, some of the artists explore common human aspirations in their work. In life, is it better to accept what we have rather than what we don't?
- What makes a responsible citizen? Use the prints to think about and discuss important contemporary issues. What can you learn about citizenship and activism from the way that the artists have presented the messages that they want to share.