

## **Readers' Companion and Study Guide: Nude in Winter by Francine Sterle (Tupelo Press, 2006)**

### **Introduction**

Nude in Winter is composed entirely of poems written in response to visual art. Any literary representation of visual art is called "ekphrasis," from the Greek words *ek* (out) and *phrazein* (tell, declare, pronounce). The term was first employed by Greek rhetoricians to denote a vivid, visual description, but over the centuries, it has undergone several shifts in meaning. In its earliest, somewhat restricted sense, ekphrasis focused on literal perception, i.e., writers simply described what was in front of them. The ideal was to capture in words what they saw on the canvas. Over time, writers began to balance the literal and the figural by using the painting as a catalyst not only for describing but also for addressing and reflecting upon the subject of the work. Perhaps Leo Spitzer's definition, from his 1962 essay on Keats's "Ode to a Grecian Urn," comes closest to our present conception of the word: "the poetical description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art."

Poets often turn to visual art as a springboard for new work. By entering the artist's spatial realm for inspiration and engaging with a painting, photograph, or sculpture, poets learn to address an original piece of art and give it a voice. Responding to visual art requires an intense, absorbed state of mind and leads to leaps in perception and experience. Writing is not only a matter of learning to write but also of learning to see. We improve our writing by improving our perception. Ad Reinhardt, a 20th-century American artist, once said that "looking is not as easy as it looks." "Seeing" means going beyond the surface features and trying to articulate an understanding of what an image might mean. Because visual art offers images that are representational rather than real, writers are confronted with something that is, yet is not, exactly what it seems. A writer translates with the eyes, and what the eye sees is an act of choice. The eye, notes Nelson Goodman, "selects, rejects, organizes, discriminates, associates, classifies, analyzes, constructs." Our eyes tend to refuse our best commands. They roam wherever they please. "If to see more," as Teilhard de Chardin wrote, "is really to become more, if deeper vision is really fuller being," then the value of applying poetic language to the art of making art extends beyond the act of creation itself. By learning to look more closely, we expand our field of vision because the thing viewed as well as the viewer is permanently altered.

### **It's Not As Easy As It Looks: Writing about Visual Art**

Although both poets and painters employ similar techniques such as rhythm (pattern and variation), figural choice, and juxtaposition of images, unique problems arise when a poet tries to speak for a mute piece of art. The characteristics of visual and verbal art are very different. For example, a painting is visual while a poem is verbal; a painting is composed of colors and lines while a poem is composed of words and rhythms; a painting appeals primarily to the eye, a poem, to the ear; the painting's realm is spatial while a poem's is temporal; in a painting the whole is perceived instantaneously while in a poem, the whole is perceived gradually because its parts accumulate successively. The following questions suggest some of the problems a writer faces when writing about visual art.

## Poetry vs. Painting

How is space represented in poetry? How do you translate the spatial (the realm of visual art) into the temporal (the realm of poetry)?

How does a poem speak for a work of art which, by its nature, is silent?

What do you do with scale? How many lines of poetry represent how much of the image?

How do you read a painting? Top to bottom? Bottom to top? Side to side? If you don't know how to read it, how can you write it?

How do you deal with the inherent contradiction that ears are not eyes and colors are not sounds?

How do you decide how much concrete detail is necessary for the reader to form an impression of the original artwork?

How do you express visual tone—a contrast between light and shade—in a poem?

If writing about abstract art, how do you capture the nonrepresentational in words?

How do you translate line which is the basic unit of description for a visual artist? How do you handle contour? Curved lines associated with motion or tension? What about the pull of the vanishing point?

## Types of Ekphrastic Response

There are a variety of approaches available to the poet writing about visual art. Responses can vary depending on what aspect of the painting (or sculpture or photograph) the poet focuses. Although the boundaries between these often blur, approaches can be categorized as follows:

1. **Description**— Honoring traditional ekphrastic practices, the poet attempts to create in words an accurate and vivid visual composition of the original piece of art.
2. **Imitation**— The poet attempts to imitate aurally what a painting expresses visually. In this approach, the poet tries to match form and content by re-creating the visual object through verbal means.
3. **Inspiration Only**—The poet uses the painting for inspiration only, so the resulting poem has very little to do with the picture at hand. No attempt is made to describe the work of art, and the work of art may, in fact, feel irrelevant to the reader of the poem.

4. **The World Inside the Picture**—The poet may take on the persona of a figure or a particular object in the painting.
5. **Focusing on the Artist**—Poets often have considerable knowledge about the life of the artist and may include details of that life in their poems.
6. **Focusing on the Process of Painting**—The painting provides a jumping off point to write about a particular technique or a particular aspect of visual art such as composition, space, form, tone, color, etc.
7. **Creating a Narrative**—A work of art may inspire a writer to recall a personal memory and to convey personal details about the self or family. Similarly, it may inspire the writer to create a wholly fictional narrative.
8. **Examining the Self**—Visual images can lead a writer to examine difficult personal issues by providing an external context for what is being felt internally.
9. **Addressing the Picture**—A poet may address the work of art directly or engage in a dialogue or argument with it.
10. **Exploring the World Outside the Painting**—Poets sometimes respond to visual art by making statements about the world outside of the painting. The resulting poem may have political, social, or artistic implications that transcend the actual work of art.
11. **Responding to Other Art Objects**—At times, poets may attempt to respond to other types of art— a serving dish, a fan, a dressing robe, a cathedral window.
12. **Responding to Abstraction**—Responding to abstract art is given its own categorization because the poet does not have a particular image or landscape on which to focus. The poet is free to follow internal impressions and impulses. Interpretation of the visual may or may not be included in the body of the poem.

## **Nude in Winter**

It would be impossible to cover all of the recurring images and themes in Francine Sterle's Nude in Winter, but because so many of the poems focus on the body, let us consider some of these poems. Bodies shape who we are, how we see ourselves, and how we are perceived.

### ***Albion Rose***

This poem, sometimes referred to as *Dance for Albion*, is based on a color-printed etching by William Blake and focuses on the idealized male body. Blake (1757-1827) was an English poet, painter, engraver, and visionary mystic who hand-illustrated many of his own poems. Here, Blake draws the human body by dividing it into symmetrical parts. Everything has been carefully measured: nose length, breadth of the chest, the distance from elbow to thumb, from the

neck's hollow to the crown of the head. The resulting figure is flesh wedded to geometry. In *Albion Rose*, the central figure is radiant and bathed in light. One critic has suggested that the figure of Albion is a **personification** of humanity and of Britain and is freeing himself from the shackles of materialism. This picture was earlier known as *Glad Day* or *Jocund Day*, because Blake's biographer Alexander Gilcrest assumed that it illustrated a passage from Act III, Scene v of *Romeo and Juliet*. Romeo prepares to leave at dawn after their wedding-night and says:

*Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day  
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.*

Whatever the original inspiration for the picture, sometime after 1800 Blake turned it into a line engraving, added a few details (a moth and a caterpillar fleeing as the sun rises), and appended several lines of poetry:

*Albion rose from where he labour'd at the Mill with Slaves:  
Giving himself for the Nations he danc'd the dance of Eternal Death.*

### ***Hans Bellmer's Doll***

On the opposite end of the spectrum is Hans Bellmer (1902-1975), a Polish-French painter and graphic artist, who is known for the dark, erotic quality of his work. In 1923, Bellmer began to construct jointed and articulated dolls in the form of adolescent girls and then photographed the resulting doll in a variety of menacing positions. For him, the body was something that could be manipulated at whim. Bellmer was deeply attached to the life-size doll he created and wanted to be buried with her. The poem not only describes the various and disturbing poses Bellmer photographed but also attempts to reclaim the girl the doll represents.

### ***Untitled (Mélisande)***

Another doll figure appears in the artwork of Joseph Cornell (1903-73). Cornell was an American sculptor, one of the pioneers and leading exponents of "assemblage." He had no formal artistic training, and his most celebrated works are his distinctive boxes. In these simple boxes, he arranged surprising collections of photographs, bric-a-brac, or any number of found objects. He relied on these odds and ends to create unexpected, irrational juxtapositions and to evoke a certain sense of nostalgia. Cornell was a fascinating, if troubled, figure. After his father died when he was 14, Cornell became the primary caregiver for his younger brother Robert who had cerebral palsy. Cornell lived with both his brother and mother until their deaths. Throughout his life, he battled depression and once said, "You don't know how terrible it is to be locked into boxes all your life; you have no idea what a terrible thing it is." Sterle's poem captures the gnawing sense of entrapment Cornell felt all of his life.

### ***Renoir***

Perhaps the most telling statement about the body occurs in the poem about the 19th century French Impressionist, Pierre-August Renoir (1841-1919). Renoir began work as a painter of

porcelain in a Paris factory where he gained considerable knowledge and appreciation of light, fresh colors that were to distinguish his work for the rest of his life. He was drawn to beauty, particularly female beauty, and many of his paintings are of women: nudes, young girls, portraits. As he matured as an artist, his preferred female body type also matured and became more ample. He once said, "I never think I have finished a nude until I think I could pinch it." In the 1890s, Renoir began to suffer from severe rheumatism, which eventually crippled him so that he had to have his brush tied into his hand in order to paint. The insight that the body is "entitled to some lyricism," expresses poignantly the respect that Sterle grants the decaying body.

### ***Parable of the Blind***

Continuing with the theme of the failure of the body, Pieter Bruegel's *Parable of the Blind* depicts seven blind men walking on a pathless road. Bruegel (c. 1525-69), a 16th-century, Netherlands painter, is well-known for his treatment of Biblical proverbs. This painting is based on the following passage: "Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." In the painting, each blind man has his hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him. The first man, predictably, has fallen down into a ditch. The poem uses **anaphora**, the repetition of a word at the beginning of the lines, to emphasize connectedness as well as to create tension. Nobody escapes the difficulties of this world. Each one of us, inevitably, falls into the ditch.

**Nude in Winter** vacillates between poems about the seer and the seen, the tortured and the adored. It moves from agonizing portraits of Egon Schiele and Toulouse-Lautrec to the redemptive poems based on Sassaferato's Madonna and Man Ray's nude. In each, the body plays a central role. As you examine the poems more closely, you might want to consider the following study questions:

What is Sterle trying to say about the body? The female form? The male gaze? How do the poems based on the artwork of women differ from the ones mentioned here?

How do the poems look on the page? Note the length, the arrangement of lines, or any other visual detail.

Who is the perceived speaker of the poem? Is it the author? Does the poem address someone specific? Does the painting itself speak?

What is the world of the poem? Does it have a setting? Is it a landscape? Does it have characters? What elements are foregrounded and why?

How does Sterle handle poems based on the art of abstraction or surrealism?

What part of the artwork has inspired Sterle? Is her reaction empathic, critical, probing?

Does the meaning of the poem match that of the artwork itself? If not, what social or philosophical issues is Sterle trying to address?

How much description of the original artwork does Sterle provide? How grounded do you need to be in the original piece in order to understand the poem? How might the poem change if it were accompanied by the painting about which the poem is written?

## **Learning to Look at a Work of Art**

Although many students have viewed a variety of artistic genres before entering college, many of them lack previous experience in looking closely at visual art and studying the various conventions of painting. Below are suggestions to help students learn how to ground themselves in a piece of art.

1. First, look at the style of the painting. Try to determine what the artist is trying to convey. Perhaps the painting depicts realistically a particular person, place, or thing. Perhaps it provides a mere impression. Perhaps it lacks any recognizable image and is abstract and non-representational.
2. Write down your first response to the work of art. Although you may reject your initial impressions later, it is important to put those first, fleeting impressions into words. Is it compelling, confusing, beautiful, offensive? Pay attention to your senses. You might want to make a list of comparisons that come to mind as you view the piece of art.
3. Try to determine why you are having this particular response. How has the artist manipulated the composition in order to elicit these feelings in you?
4. Determine the tone of the painting. An artist uses color, light, and shadow expressively. Tone can be used to create drama, emotion, or atmosphere; its most important attribute is that it can shift and alter the expressive emphasis of a piece of art.
5. Consider the artwork from a historical perspective. Where would the work have been seen originally? A church, a palace, someone's home? In what country was it created? In what century?
6. Note the size of the painting. In a book, the original size of a painting is often difficult to determine. Size makes a significant impression on the viewer. A miniature, meant to be given to a beloved, will encourage a different response than a canvas which occupies an entire wall. An artist may use size to convey a message.
7. Look at the title. Does it help to illuminate or explain the painting? It might be ironic, humorous, vague, clever, or misleading. How does the title direct your thinking and shape your impressions?
8. How does the subject of the painting relate to the manner in which the artist depicts it? Are some elements more important than others? Does the painting effect how you see the world?

9. Perspective can add a layer of meaning. Consider the perspective employed in the painting. Visual elements may be grouped by color, texture, direction, or proximity and may convey or negate depth.
10. Try to articulate what meaning you take from the painting. Can you determine the artist's intent?
11. Can you relate to the artwork? Why or why not? Does it have any relevance to your life?
12. After considering all of this, meditate on the painting. Try to enter deeply into it in a prolonged and reflective way. Does your response change? If so, how?

## **Exercises**

### **What Do You See**

This exercise is designed to encourage students to look more closely at a work of art. It is a good exercise for those just beginning to write about visual art since it encourages students to attend to the painting in a simple way and then to make a verbal gesture away from the painting at hand.

Choose a painting with realistic elements. List as many images as you can see in the painting. After doing so, choose the strongest five images. Let each image take up a single line of poetry. Then, allow your imagination to move in a different direction (away from the painting) in order to end the poem.

Example:

#### **On an Ojibwe Bird Painting**

Radiating rings of heat.  
A sun in the belly of a bird.  
Kidney-shaped blue lungs.  
The outline of a wing.  
A hovering.  
The white air is like that.  
Here it is: a deathbed lull, a lessening.  
Inactivity in the light.

### **Inserting Yourself Into a Painting**

Go to a gallery or museum and choose a painting that you find disturbing in some way. It could be a painting of a realistic scene, an abstract painting, or anything in-between. Pretend that you can walk through the canvas and into the painting. Try to experience the painting from the inside

out. What is the scene or action around you? What do you see, smell, think, taste, touch? Write a poem from this perspective.

### **Poem From Impressions**

Choose a picture from an art book or a postcard from a museum. Examine it for approximately three minutes. At the end of three minutes, close the book or turn over the postcard. Try to recall as much about the picture as you can. Write down whatever you remember. As you do this, consider the following:

- What is the subject matter?
- List the colors you recall
- Can you remember any of the small details?
- What feelings or sensations have stayed with you?
- What thoughts came into your mind as you were looking?

Write a poem based on the impressions you've remembered. Do not look at the picture again until you have finished your poem. This exercise will allow the painting at hand to fade into the background while encouraging you to focus on your initial impressions.

### **Family Photograph**

Ask students to bring in a family photograph, preferably one that is emotionally meaningful to them. It may chronicle an important personal event, or capture an ordinary pose or place that holds special significance.

Have students write two or three sentences about why the photo is important to them. Then, ask them to write a poem from the perspective of the person who took the photo. Who was it? A relative, friend, stranger? How did that person view the scene the moment it was taken? Allow the poem to unfold as organically as possible in order to allow a chance for surprise and insight.

### **Color Poem**

Choose a color to which you are drawn. It can be a primary or secondary color, a "hot" color or a "cool" color. Create a list of objects that share that color. Next, take a few minutes to continue to push the associations so that you end up with at least ten objects on your list.

Example: You might generate the following list for a painting that is primarily purple:

- a bruise
- a plum
- a royal cloak



a choking baby  
varicose veins  
a bishop's vestments,  
a boyfriend's rage  
a cow nobody's ever seen  
holding your breath  
a bowl of Concord grapes  
a Halloween witch's lips  
an eggplant

Write a meditative poem on the color you've chosen. Alternately, choose at least four items from the list you've generated and write a poem that creates its own imaginary painting.

### **Portrait Poem**

Choose a portrait that intrigues you. Look closely at the face, the eyes, the body, the background, the clothing. How old is the person? Is it someone famous? A friend of the artist? A patron? A model? What year was it painted? Imagine what his or her life was like. What is the person's mood in the painting? What is happening just beyond the picture frame? Write a persona poem by becoming the person in the painting and giving that person a voice.

### **Stylistic Model Poem**

Choose one poem in Nude in Winter that captures your attention. After you have chosen the poem, find a piece of art to write about. Go to a gallery or museum if possible. This exercise works best if you are viewing the actual artwork. The artwork you choose should be something to which you have a strong, emotional response.

Write a poem using the pre-selected poem as your stylistic model. Try to imitate the line length, the sentence structure, the rhythms, etc. Be sure to choose the poem before you choose your painting.

### **Artist Study**

Choose a picture with which you are unfamiliar by an artist whose life and works you do not know or know very little about. Study the picture and imagine what kind of artist painted it. What sort of personal life do you imagine the artist having? What is the painter's attitude toward life? Is the artist happy, troubled, depressed? Is the artist successful or struggling? Jot down your impressions.

Now, do some research on the artist. Go to the library, search on-line, or read a book about the artist's life. What things were you right about? Wrong about? What were you most surprised to

find out about the artist? Does knowing about the artist's life change or inform how you view the painting?

Write a poem based on the painting but include details about the artist's life to enhance the poem.

### **Seeing Clearly**

Choose a picture of something you can describe. Write a short prose paragraph describing what you see in terms of shape, line, color. Keep your observations as objective as possible. Do not describe your feelings or the sensations that were evoked by the picture.

Example: A prose paragraph on Jean-Francois Millet's *The Gleaners* might look something like this:

Three women are in a bronze-colored field. They are bent over, gathering leftover grain. Around their waists are white aprons which are folded back to create a kind of sack into which they put the grain. You do not see the women's faces because the women are either bending or their faces are in shadow. The figures are very close to the foreground which makes them appear to be large against an expansive background. In the far distance is a farm scene. On the right there are haystacks and houses; on the left, larger haystacks. There does not appear to be a middle distance in the painting—what you see is either very close or very far away. This makes the women appear larger than life in relation to the background, which seems to be a long way off.

Once you have completed your description, pass it to another person in the group but do not pass along the picture. The person must write a poem about the painting based solely on your description. Afterwards, match the poem to the original picture.

### **Public Art**

Find a sculpture or statue on campus or in a park, garden, or public square. What do you notice as you approach it? If it is a statue, who is the person? Is the person famous to the area? What does the pose imply? What is its size? If it is a sculpture, is it representative of anything? Why do you suppose it was placed there? What material is it made of? When was it installed? What is its relationship to the city?

Imagine that the sculpture or statue wants to leave that spot. Where would it go? What obstacles might it face? Write a poem based on the piece you've chosen. Each line should begin with the phrase, "I can't stay here . . . ."

## **Thumbnail Sketches of the Artists featured in Nude in Winter**

### **Bernice Abbott**

(1898–1991). American photographer who was born in Springfield, Ohio and died in retirement in Monson, Maine. In 1921 she moved to Paris to study with sculptor Emile Bourdelle. Abbot also worked with the Surrealist photographer Man Ray for two years before opening her own studio in Paris. She photographed the leading artists in France and had her first exhibition there in 1926. Abbott returned to the United States in 1929, and in 1936 Abbott joined with Paul Strand to establish the Photo League, whose initial purpose was to provide the radical press with photographs of trade union activities and political protests. Her five decades of accomplishments behind the camera range from portraiture and modernist experimentation to documentation and scientific interpretation.

### **Frank Auerbach**

(1931– ). German born painter who was sent by his parents to Britain in 1939 to avoid persecution by the Nazi regime and who adopted British citizenship in 1947. Auerbach's work is primarily figurative lying in a realm somewhere between pure portraiture and narrative, but with a very expressive use of the texture of paint itself. His subjects rarely change—he has used only three models in his entire career—so spontaneity in his work comes from varying the densities of the paint and the color applications. He is often associated with the artists of the School of London, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud and Leon Kossoff.

### **Alice Bailly**

(1872–1938). Swiss painter and multimedia artist who was one of Switzerland's most radical painters in the early decades of the 20th century. From 1904 until the outbreak of World War I, Bailly lived in Paris, where she associated with Cubist artists. From 1906 to 1910 her work was influenced by Fauvism, and around 1910 she became interested in Cubism and Futurism. In 1918 she became involved with the Dada circle in Zurich. She settled in Lausanne in 1923. Her last major project was to paint eight large murals for the foyer of the Théâtre Municipal, Lausanne. This monumental task led to exhaustion, which presumably made Bailly more susceptible to the tuberculosis that claimed her two years later.

### **Balthus**

(1908–2001). A French painter born Balthazar Klossowski de Rola in Paris of aristocratic Polish parents. His father, a noted art historian, and his mother were part of cultural elite in Paris. Balthus's older brother, Pierre Klossowski, was a philosopher and writer influenced by theology and the works of Marquis de Sade. Balthus had no formal training but had the reputation of being an infant prodigy and was encouraged by several important artists who were family friends. He was obsessed with the theme of the adolescent girl awakening to sexual consciousness, usually depicted in languid but powerful interiors. He spent most of his life living in seclusion outside Paris and shunning all publicity.

### **Max Beckmann**

(1884–1950). Recognized as Germany's foremost painter of the 20th century, Beckmann was an Expressionist painter (though he strongly objected to such categorization) whose work is

often difficult to understand because his iconography is so highly personal. Although he rarely directly depicted the horrific scenes that he endured while working as a medical orderly in World War I, his work reflects the violent and painful tone of war. In 1933, Beckmann was forced by the Nazis to resign from his teaching position at the Stadelches Kunstinstitut in Frankfurt and moved to the Netherlands in 1937. During this period, he began the series of nine triptychs that took him the remainder of his life to complete. Beckmann spent the end of his life teaching in the United States.

### **Hans Bellmer**

(1902–1975). Polish-French painter, photographer, and graphic artist, renowned for the erotic quality of this work. In 1923 he began to construct jointed and articulated dolls in the form of life-size, pubescent girls and photographed them in a variety of disturbing postures. He initiated his doll project to oppose the fascism of the Nazi Party by declaring that he would make no work that would support the German state. Represented by mutated forms and unconventional poses, his dolls were directed specifically at the cult of the perfect body then prominent in Germany.

### **Craig Blacklock**

(1954– ). Minnesota photographer, best known as a nature photographer, particularly for *The Lake Superior Images* which he co-authored with his former wife Nadine Blacklock. An ardent conservationist, he hopes his images will inspire people to protect the finest landscapes of the region (particularly the North Shore of Lake Superior) from further residential development. He has numerous books of nature photography in print, but in 1996, he shifted in his work and began the photography for a book of black and white nudes on Lake Superior entitled *A Voice Within—The Lake Superior Nudes* (2004) from which the title poem, *Nude in Winter*, is taken.

### **William Blake**

(1757–1827). British poet, painter, visionary mystic, and engraver, who illustrated and printed his own books. Blake proclaimed the supremacy of the imagination over the rationalism and materialism of the 18th century. From his early years, he experienced visions of angels and ghostly monks; he saw and conversed with the angel Gabriel, the Virgin Mary, and various historical figures. His first book of poems, *Poetical Sketches*, appeared in 1783 and was followed by *Songs of Innocence* (1789), and *Songs of Experience* (1794). Blake moved south of the Thames to Lambeth in 1790. During this time he began to work on his ‘prophetic books’, where he expressed his lifelong concern with the struggle of the soul to free its natural energies from reason and organized religion. Blake hated the effects of the Industrial Revolution in England and looked forward to the establishment of a New Jerusalem “in England’s green and pleasant land.”

From 1818 Blake started to enjoy the admiration of a group of young disciples. Blake’s last years were passed in obscurity, quarreling even with some of the circle of friends who supported him. Blake never shook off poverty, in large part due to his inability to compete in the highly competitive field of engraving and his expensive invention that enabled him to design illustrations and print words at the same time.

## **Pieter Bruegel**

(c. 1525–1569). The greatest Netherlands painter and draughtsman of the 16th century. Early in his career his paintings were crowded panoramas but later his figures became bigger and bolder, as is seen most notably in his novel treatment of proverbs. He enjoyed a considerable reputation in his lifetime, but it was only in the 20th century that he became recognized as a profound religious painter and an artist whose human sympathy and understanding has hardly been excelled. His brilliance as a craftsman is also universally acknowledged; his technique was precise yet always fluent, with the paint often thinly applied giving transparency to a superb variety of color.

## **Marc Chagall**

(1887–1985). A Russian-born Jew, Chagall was active mainly in Paris. He studied in St. Petersburg but went to Paris in 1910 and there became an intimate of the avant-garde circle. He returned to Russia but left again in 1923. The element of fantasy in his work caused much controversy with Russian authorities who demanded traditional realism with the social message. Chagall was prolific as a painter and also as a book illustrator and designer of stained glass and of sets and costumes for the theater and ballet. His work was dominated by two sources of imagery: memories of the Jewish life and folklore of his early years in Russia, and the Bible. He derived some of his spatial dislocations and prismatic color effects from Cubism, but he created a highly distinctive style, remarkable for its sense of fairy-tale fantasy.

## **Giorgio de Chirico**

(1888–1978). An Italian painter, de Chirico was the originator of Metaphysical painting which juxtaposes the commonplace and the fantastic. He was interested in using ordinary objects and neutralizing them by setting them in new and mysterious relationships. His early paintings convey an atmosphere of strangeness, including empty spaces, illogical shadows, and unexpected perspectives.

## **Joseph Cornell**

(1903–1973). Cornell was an American sculptor, one of the pioneers and most celebrated exponents of “assemblage.” He had no formal training in art and his most characteristic works are his highly distinctive boxes. He was fascinated by fragments of once beautiful, impressionist objects and relied on the Surrealist technique of irrational juxtaposition and on the evocation of nostalgia for his appeal.

## **Salvador Dali**

(1904–1989). A Spanish painter, sculptor, graphic artist, and designer. After passing through many different phases, he joined the Surrealists in 1929, and his talent for self-publicity rapidly made him the most famous representative of the movement. Throughout his life, he cultivated eccentricity and exaggerated his disposition toward megalomaniac exhibitionism, claiming that this was the source of his creative energy. In one famous example, he appeared in a diving suit at the opening of the London Surrealist exhibition in 1936. His paintings often depict an unreal dream-space and have a strangely hallucinatory character. He described his pictures as ‘hand-painted dream photographs’ and had certain favorite recurring images, such as watches (that were bent and flowing as if made of melted wax), food, burning giraffes.

## **Edgar Degas**

(1834–1917). French painter and sculptor. Degas was one of the leaders of Impressionism. He was, however, an Impressionist only in certain restricted aspects of his work and like Manet stood somewhat aloof from the rest the group. Most Impressionists had a great deal of interest in landscape painting, but Degas had little interest in it. He was more interested in draughtsmanship than most of the others and liked to give the suggestion of accidental, spontaneous, and unplanned scenes. Degas's pictures often cut off figures in the manner of badly executed snapshots or unfamiliar viewpoints. He was very interested in conveying the impression of movement, but he did not paint out of doors or directly from nature. His subject matter ranged from horses in action to women bathing to dancers in characteristic postures.

## **Marcel Duchamp**

(1887–1968). French artist and art theorist. Although Duchamp produced few works, he is regarded as one of the most influential figures in 20th century art because of the originality and fertility of his ideas. He often used ready-made objects as the basis of his art. He said that any object becomes a work of art if he selects it from the limbo of unregarded objects and declares it to be so. In one piece he took a bicycle wheel and mounted it on a kitchen stool; in another he added a mustache and beard as well as an obscene inscription to a reproduction of the Mona Lisa. Two other pieces included a bottle rack he bought in a Paris store and a urinal. Later in his life he virtually abandoned art for chess. He was a good enough player to represent France in four Olympiads and his obsession for the game intensified as he grew older. Man Ray wrote of his marriage, "Duchamp spent most of the one-week they lived together studying chess problems, and his bride, in desperate retaliation, got up one night when he was asleep and glued the chess pieces to the board. They were divorced three months later."

## **Leonor Fini**

(1908–1995 ). Born in Buenos Aires but raised in Trieste, Italy, Fini was interested in painting from childhood, participating in her first exhibition at the age of seventeen. She met members of the Surrealist group in Paris in 1936 and became friends of many of them—Dali, Max Ernst, René Magritte. A fiercely independent woman, unwilling to submit either to the groups' shared goals or the pronouncements of André Breton, she never joined their group. However, she did take part in their exhibitions, and the irrational elements in many of her paintings are related to the Surrealist sensibility.

## **Helen Frankenthaler**

(1928– ). An American 20th century painter who evolved her own manner of Abstract Expressionism. She was particularly interested in exploring new methods of color combination, and she experimented with using thinned paint applied to unprimed canvas. Although abstract, her work often evokes suggestions of landscape and is noted for its lyrical qualities. She grew up in New York City, the daughter of a judge, and was married to the painter Robert Motherwell from 1958-1971.

## **Paul Gauguin**

(1848–1903). The French Post-Impressionist painter, sculptor, and printmaker, born in Paris of a journalist and a Peruvian Creole mother. Gauguin spent his childhood in Peru, joined the merchant Marine, and later worked successfully as a stockbroker. In his mid 20s he became a part-time artist and soon gave up his employment to become a full-time artist. During the next few years, he was unsuccessful in marketing his pictures and had to sell his collection to support himself and his family. He moved to Brittany, abandoning his family, and joined a group of artists who were attracted by his picturesque personality and new ideas in aesthetics. It was during his time in Brittany that he painted *The Yellow Christ*. In his early 40s, he left France for Tahiti where most of his famous paintings were conceived.

## **Artemisia Gentileschi**

(c. 1593–1652). Daughter of Orazio Gentileschi, an Italian artist who was a friend and follower of Caravaggio, the most influential Italian painter of the 17th century. Artemisia also followed Caravaggio's style and was known for her strong, formidable personality. She was gifted and precocious as a child, and her father oversaw her artistic training until he hired his friend, the artist Agostino Tassi, to tutor her. At the age of 19 she brought an allegation of rape against him. During the legal proceedings she was tortured. She achieved much success as an artist and lived a life of independence rare for a woman of the time.

## **Nan Goldin**

(1953– ). Born in Washington, D.C. Shortly thereafter, Goldin and her family moved to a suburb of Boston, where she was to spend several primarily unhappy years before moving away from her family. In 1965, when Nan was 14 years old, her older sister, Barbara Holly Goldin, committed suicide. Deeply disturbed by this event, Goldin sought comfort in her friends: in them, she created an alternate family. Having decided that conventional family life and traditional schooling were not for her, Goldin moved in with a series of foster families. As the memory of her sister started to become hazy, Goldin began to take pictures to preserve the present, and thus her fading memories of the past. She photographed her friends so she would never lose the memory of them, as had happened with her sister. Her photographs were her way of documenting their lives, and, in turn, her own. The images of her friends—drag queens, drug addicts, lovers and family—are intense, searing portraits that, together, make a document of Goldin's life.

## **Francisco de Goya**

(1746–1828). Spanish painter and graphic artist. Goya was the most powerful and original European artist at this time, but his genius was slow in maturing, and he was well into his 30s before he began producing work that set them apart from his contemporaries. An important turning point in his career was the onset of a mysterious and traumatic illness he developed in 1792 which left him stone deaf. It marked the beginning of his preoccupation with the morbid and bazaar, which was to be such a feature of his mature work. He is well-known for painting two famous scenes of the bloody uprising of the citizens of Madrid against the occupying forces as well as 65 etchings entitled *The Disasters of War* which were nightmarish scenes depicting atrocities committed by both French and Spanish. They are said to be the most savage protest against cruelty and war which the visual imagination of man has conceived.

## **Dorothy Hall**

(19\_\_? – ). Minnesota painter who exhibits regularly at the MacRostie Gallery in Grand Rapids, Minnesota.

## **Edward Hopper**

(1882–1967). American painter best known for his realistic painting style. Hopper gained widespread recognition as a central exponent of American Scene painting, expressing the loneliness, circuitry, and stagnation of town life. Yet Hopper remained always an individualist, and his work makes no individual comments. He once said, “I don’t think I ever tried to paint the American scene; I’m trying to paint myself.” Of the loneliness and nostalgia which ascribed to his works, he said: “if they are, it isn’t at all conscious.” His paintings convey a mood of loneliness and desolation by their emptiness or by the presence of anonymous, non-communicating figures.

## **Jean Ipousteguy**

(1920–2006). Jean Ipousteguy was a puzzling and relatively unappreciated contemporary sculptor who worked in the Surrealist tradition. While the Guggenheim Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York have his sculptures in their collections, his work is better known in Europe than in the United States. He chose to work with figurative art in order to engage and excite the viewer’s imagination, but like all Surrealists he distorted reality and depicted his figures in a dreamlike state that has no easily deciphered meaning and is often unsettling. Ipousteguy called himself a Freudian and aimed to represent the psychological distress of contemporary society in his work.

## **Frida Kahlo**

(1907–1954). Mexican painter. Kahlo’s personality was characterized by a deep sense of independence and rebellion against social and moral codes of behavior. Her life was marked by physical suffering, starting with the polio she contracted at the age of five. In 1925 she was involved in a bus accident which caused severe injuries when a pole pierced her from stomach to pelvis. The medical treatment which followed was torturous: surgical operations (thirty-two throughout her life), corsets of different kinds, and mechanical “stretching” systems. Much of her work was painted as she was lying in bed. Because of these physical conditions, Kahlo tried but was never able to have any children, and this was a great sorrow for her. The great love of her life was Diego Rivera, whom she married twice, but she also had many lovers, including Leon Trotsky and André Breton’s wife.

## **Käthe Kollwitz**

(1867-1945). German graphic artist and sculptor. Kollwitz came from a family of strong moral and social convictions, and after marrying a doctor, she lived in the poorer quarters of northern Berlin, where she gained firsthand acquaintance of the wretched conditions in which the urban poor lived. Much of her work was intended as a social protest against the working



conditions of the day. She concentrated on the great tragic and poignant themes of life and many of her later works were pacifist in intention (her son was killed in the First World War and her grandson in the Second World War).

### **Willem de Kooning**

(1904–1997). American Abstract Expressionist painter who was born in Rotterdam and immigrated to the United States in 1926. His early work was conservative, but his friendship with Gorky drew him into the circle of artists who would later become prominent in the Abstract Expressionist movement, and in the 1930s he experimented vigorously. After his first one-man show in 1948, he was recognized as sharing with Jackson Pollock the unofficial leadership of the Abstract Expressionist group. Unlike Pollock, de Kooning usually retained figurative elements of this painting, and he achieved notoriety with his *Women* series. Some of the figures appear grotesque, and his brushwork is often frenzied.

### **Claude Monet**

(1840–1926). French Impressionist painter. Monet is regarded as the archetypal Impressionist because his devotion to the ideals of the movement was unwavering throughout his long career. He spent his youth in Le Havre, where he first excelled as a caricaturist but was then converted to landscape painting by his early mentor. Monet's devotion to painting out of doors is illustrated by the famous story concerning one of his most ambitious early works, *Women in the Garden*. The picture was large and to enable him to paint all of it outside, he had a trench dug in the Garden so that the canvas could be raised or lowered by pulleys to the height he required. Monet once said he would not paint even the leaves in the background unless the lighting conditions were exactly right.

### **Alice Neel**

(1900–1984). Born in Pennsylvania, Neel studied at the Philadelphia School of Design for Women and attended the Chester Springs summer school of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts where she met Carlos Enriquez. She married him and traveled with him to Havana, Cuba. In 1926 their daughter Santillana Enriquez born but died as a young child of diphtheria. Another daughter Isabetta was born the following year. Carlos left with Isabetta to visit Cuba for an extended period of time. A productive summer of painting for Neel was followed by a nervous breakdown. The next winter, she attempted suicide and was hospitalized. She met and moved in with Kenneth Doolittle and lived in Greenwich Village. Their relationship was turbulent, and in 1934 Doolittle destroyed many of Neel's paintings. She joined the rolls of the WPA/Federal Art Project, Easel Division. In 1938 she moved to Spanish Harlem which is the setting for *Rag in Window*. Her paintings mix psychological intensity with bold expressionism.

### **Georgia O'Keeffe**

(1887–1986). American painter. One of the pioneers of Modernism in America, O'Keeffe was a member of the circle of Stieglitz, whom she met in 1916 and married in 1924. She is best known for her near-abstract paintings based on enlargement of flower and plant forms, works of great elegance and rhythmic vitality, whose sensuous forms are often sexually suggestive. From the 1930s, she spent each winter in New Mexico and settled there after her husband's death in 1946. The desert landscape appeared frequently in her paintings, especially

the bleached bones for which she is famous. She began to travel widely in the 1950s, and many of her later paintings were inspired by views of the earth, sky, and clouds seen from an airplane.

### **Pablo Picasso**

(1881–1973). Spanish painter, sculptor, graphic artist, ceramicist, and designer, the most famous, versatile, and prolific artist of the 20th century. His personality dominated the development of the visual arts during most of the first half of the 20th century, and he provided the incentive for most of the revolutionary changes during this time. In 1904 Picasso settled in Paris and was part of an avant-garde circle of artists and writers. He was interested in the analysis and synthesis of form and believed strongly that painting should be conceptual rather than purely visual. Around 1925, he began to make more violently expressive works, fraught with emotional tension, filled with foreboding, anguish, and despair. During this period, he painted his most famous work, *Guernica*, to express horror and revulsion at the destruction by bombing of the Basque capital Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Picasso once said, “painting is not done to decorate apartments, it is an instrument of war against brutality and darkness.”

### **Jackson Pollock**

(1912–1956). Prominent figure of the Abstract Expressionist movement. In the mid-1940’s, he was painting in a completely abstract manner, and the ‘drip and splash’ style for which he is best known emerged with some abruptness in 1947. Instead of using the traditional easel he affixed his canvas to the floor or the wall and poured and dripped his paint from a can; instead of using brushes, he manipulated it with stick, trowels or knives. He was married to the artist Lee Krasner, and he struggled with alcoholism throughout his life. He died in a car crash.

### **Antoine Préault**

(1809–1879). A favorably disposed nineteenth-century critic described the fiery sculptor Antoine Augustin Préault thus: “The fever of poetry, the drunkenness of beauty, the horror of vulgarity, and the madness of glory possessed and tormented Préault.” Known as Auguste, he was one of the most important sculptors of the French Romantic movement. He was born in the working-class Marais district of Paris and was apprenticed to an ornamental carver. By the time of his Salon début in 1833, Préault was immersed in the socially conscious subject-matter favored by the liberal Romantics among whom he moved. Préault has never enjoyed the continuing fame afforded to his contemporaries. The reason for this is not to be found in the quality of his work but in his aggressive personality; he belonged to the circle of revolutionaries in 1830. Chance events also contributed to his relative obscurity: Préault’s studio was destroyed in the fighting around the Commune, and many of his plaster models were smashed.

### **Sterling Rathsack**

(19\_\_? – ). Sculptor and painter, Rathsack has maintained a studio in Superior, Wisconsin for over twenty years. He works in a variety of media, often using recycled, salvaged or renewable materials.

## **Man Ray**

(1890–1977). American painter, draughtsman, sculptor, and filmmaker, he was secretive about his early life and neither his real name (it may have been Emmanuel Rudnitsky) nor the origin of his pseudonym is known. In 1915 he began a lifelong friendship with Marcel Duchamp. In 1921 he went to Paris and became a member of the European Dada group and then of the Surrealist movement. In 1940 he returned to America to escape the Nazi occupation of Paris and settled in Hollywood, but he returned to Paris in 1951. Man Ray is regarded as one of the most important photographers of his time.

## **Pierre-Auguste Renoir**

(1841–1919). French Impressionist painter, born at Limoges. In 1854 he began work as a painter in a porcelain factory in Paris, gaining experience with color that was to distinguish his Impressionist work as well as learning the importance of good craftsmanship. He had a predilection toward lighthearted themes and beauty. His paintings communicate great joy and an appreciation of all that is pleasant and pretty. Many of his paintings are of women: nudes, young girls, portraits. In the 1890s he began to suffer from rheumatism, which eventually crippled him.

## **Germaine Richier**

(1904–1959). A 20th century French sculptor, Richier had traditional training as a carver but around 1940 began to create a distinctive type of bronze sculpture. Influenced by Giacometti, her compositions became more open and often had slender, elongated limbs or fibrils suggestive of insect life so that her figures appear to be half animal or half insect. Richier's surfaces have a tattered and lacerated effect, creating a macabre feeling of decomposition, and she was one of the pioneers of an open form of sculpture in which enclosed space becomes as important and alive as the solid material.

## **Jan van Riemsdyk**

(1541–1542). Dutch-born artist who was well-known for the accuracy and beauty of his medical illustrations.

## **Auguste Rodin**

(1840–1917). French sculptor, one of the greatest and most influential European artists of his period. He came from a poor background, was rejected by an art school three times, and for many years worked as an ornamental Mason. Controversy often attended his work because his modeling is often rough and unfinished, and anatomical forms are exaggerated or simplified for the sake of intensity of expression. Rodin met Camille Claudel (1864–1943) in Paris in 1882. Claudel, who was seventeen years old at the time, wanted to become a sculptor. At forty-one, Rodin was on the threshold of a brilliant career. For a brief period, the two artists had an intense love affair fired by a common passion for sculpture. Claudel was present and involved during the creation of several of Rodin's masterpieces, including *Thought*, for which she was the model.

## **Robert Ryman**

(1930– ). American painter born in Nashville, Tennessee. In 1950, Ryman enlisted in the United States army reserve corps and was assigned to an army reserve band during the Korean War. In 1952, he moved to New York and studied with jazz pianist Lenny Tristano.

Taking on odd jobs to support himself, Ryman took a position as a guard at the Museum of Modern Art in June 1953. During that year, the artist made his first paintings. In 1955, Ryman began what he considers his earliest professional work, a largely monochrome painting titled *Orange Painting*. His work was first exhibited in a staff show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Throughout his career, Ryman has isolated the most basic components of painting and experimented with their variations. He is best known for paintings that are completely white and displayed on entirely white walls.

### **Giovanni Battista Salvi Sassoferrato**

(1609–1685). A 17th century Italian painter (known by the name of his town of birth) who specialized in religious works painted in an extremely sweet style. The paintings are very clearly drawn and pure in their coloring. Little is known of his life and few of his pictures are dated. His work, however, was in great demand and was often purchased by private individuals for their collections.

### **Egon Schiele**

(1890–1918). Austrian painter and draughtsman. Schiele studied at the Vienna Academy where he met Klimt, who was a strong influence on his early style. By 1909, however, he had begun to develop his own highly distinctive style, which is characterized by an aggressive linear energy expressing acute nervous intensity. He painted portraits, landscapes, and semi-allegorical works, but he is best known for his drawings of nudes (including self-portrait drawings), which have a disturbing and explicit erotic power. In 1912 he was briefly imprisoned on indecency charges, and several of his drawings were burned. The figures he portrays are typically lonely or anguished, their bodies emaciated and twisted, expressing an aching intensity of feeling. His work was beginning to receive international acclaim when he died in the influenza epidemic of 1918.

### **Kiki Smith**

(1954– ). German-American artist. Smith's art is devoted to the exploration of the human body, inside and out. *Lilith*, a deliberately unsettling sculpture, was created from lifecasts of a female model, and in accordance with the artist's instructions, is hung so that Lilith clings to the wall upside down, staring up at the viewer with glass eyes. The title refers to an ancient Sumerian demon, a creature of the air who, in post-biblical Hebrew legend, is identified as Adam's intended first wife. She flew away when he refused to accept her as his equal. Long relegated to the realms of superstition and viewed as an evil spirit dangerous to men and children, Lilith has been reinterpreted in recent decades as an ideal of female strength and independence.

### **Eleanor Bishop Speare**

(1900–1997). Born in Newton, Massachusetts, Speare spent most of her life in Weston, Massachusetts, and Manset, Maine. Distinguished as an educator for opening, along with Helen Blake, the first Red Barn Nursery School in 1943, she spent her life dedicated to nurturing the artistic impulses in children. Although she did not exhibit her own work professionally, she painted seriously all her life. The river scene, on which *You Cannot Step Twice Into the Same Stream* is based, was painted while she was visiting her son Jonathan on the West Two River in

northern Minnesota. Sterle honors the artistic achievements of her mother-in-law by including a response to her work in *Nude in Winter*.

### **Clyfford Still**

(1904–80). American painter. Born in Grafton ND, Still moved to the West Coast when he was a boy and spent much time on the family property his father purchased in Alberta, Canada. After experimenting in a number of styles, he found his own place among the Abstract Expressionists and became one of the pioneers of large, virtually monochromatic paintings. He used heavily loaded, expressively modulated impasto in jagged forms. His work can have a raw, aggressive power, but in the 1960s it became more lyrical. He considered himself something of a visionary who needed solitude to give expression to his high spiritual purpose, and he gained a reputation for cantankerousness and pretentiousness.

### **Henri Toulouse-Lautrec**

(1864–1901). French painter and graphic artist, one of the most colorful of 19th century artists. The son of an outrageously eccentric nobleman, he grew up with a love of sport, but due to a genetic defect, he never grew past 5 feet tall. His head was large and made him appear grotesquely disproportioned. Toulouse-Lautrec was stoical about his condition and never mentioned it unless he was mocking himself. Initially, he painted sporting subjects (mostly equestrian), but he began to paint the theatres, music-halls, cafés, brothels, and circuses of Paris. He lived a dissipated lifestyle but worked tirelessly even after long nights of carousing. He became an alcoholic and contracted syphilis which led to his breakdown.

### **Luc Tuymans**

(1958– ). A Belgian artist who lives and works in Antwerp. He prefers a monochromatic palette and his subject matter tends to be mundane—domestic interiors, commonplace objects, family portraits. The source of his imagery, some of which derives from documentation of Nazi atrocities, gives his canvases a brooding violence. Modest in scale and sensitive in execution, his work is powerful in its haunting evocation of lost lives and repressed histories.

### **Remedios Varo**

(1908–1963). Spanish/Mexican Surrealist painter. Varo has been one of Mexico's most revered artists since her debut solo exhibit in 1956. She was born in Spain and studied in Madrid (where she was first introduced to the vanguard movement of Surrealism), Paris and Barcelona. She returned to Paris after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and gained access to the movement's inner circle. Varo immigrated to Mexico in 1940, just after the Nazi invasion of Paris. In Mexico her remarkable imagery and visions of the universe emerged, and it was there that she produced the vast majority of her work. With meticulous craftsmanship, Varo combined her love of art, science, and magic, and created a mystical universe richly encoded with subversive meaning. She is best known for richly detailed narratives which embody this artist's quest for self-knowledge, spiritual awareness and her place within the universe.

## **Sarah Walker**

(1963– ). Born in Bethesda, Maryland, Walker lives and works in Boston and New York City. Her work is layered with systems and patterns in order to provide a filter for the particular combination of speed and density that increasingly defines the texture of lived experience. The impulse to save everything sits at the core of her work. Her artistic tendency to accumulate, stratify, and dematerialize comes directly from living with a parent whose obsessive-compulsive hoarding, over the course of years, spun slowly out of control. Referencing growth patterns, geology, metabolism, flow dynamics, cartography and imaging systems, Walker's overall intent is to create affective states in the viewer that lead to thinking visually in interpenetrating information fields which resonate equally between states of serenity and super-saturation.

## **James Whistler**

(1834–1903) Although Whistler was born in America, he spent most of this time in England. He was known for his flamboyant personality as well as for his wit and dandyism. His lifestyle was lavish, and he was often in debt. Despite his aggressive personality, his art was discrete and subtle. He believed that painting should exist for its own sake, not to convey literary or moral ideas, and he often gave his paintings musical titles to suggest an analogy with the abstract art of music. He once brought a libel case against John Ruskin, a famous literary critic, who had written a damning review of his work. Ruskin had written that he “never expected to hear a coxcomb ask 200 guineas for flinging a pot of paint in the public's face.”

The picture of *Battersea Bridge*, which Sterle writes about in *Nude in Winter*, was shown in court: “That is Mr. Grahame's picture. It represents Battersea Bridge by moonlight.”

“Which part of the picture is the Bridge?” (Laughter) “Do you say that this is a correct representation of Battersea Bridge?”

“I did not intend it to be a correct portrait of the Bridge . . . . As to what the picture represents, that depends on who looks that it. To some persons it may represent all that is intended; to others it may represent nothing.”

In the end, Whistler won to the libel suit, but instead of receiving 1,000 pounds in damages for which he asked, he received a single farthing.

## **Andrew Wyeth**

(1917–2009). American painter, son and pupil of the well-known muralist and illustrator of children's books, N.C. Wyeth. Wyeth's work consists almost entirely of depictions of the people and places of the two areas he knew best -- his native Chadds Ford, Pennsylvania, and the area near Cushing, Maine where he has a summer home. He usually paints in watercolor or tempera with a precise and detailed technique, and often he conveys a sense of loneliness or nostalgia. There is a wide disparity of critical opinion about his status: some call him a great master, but at least one critic noted, “what most appeals to the public . . . is the artist's very banality of imagination.”

The material in this study guide was influenced by and is indebted to many of the sources cited below.

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