

Self in the City Teaching Resource

Ages 11–18 (Grades 6–12)

Materials needed:

- Paper
- Pencil
- Cardboard or another surface thick enough for collage work
- Scraps from old magazines, newspapers, mail, clothes, or other materials for mixed-media work
- Glue or tape

1–1.5 hours (includes three 30-minute activities)

Essential Questions:

- What is a community?
- How does the built environment (urban, suburban, or rural) encourage and/or discourage formation of a community?
- To what communities do you belong, and in what spaces do they exist?
- What is abstraction in art?



Image: Daniel Putnam Brinley (American, 1879–1963). *Hudson River View (Sugar Factory at Yonkers)* (detail), ca. 1915. Oil on canvas. Museum Purchase, 1995 (95.3.1).

Part 1: Introducing *Self in the City*: *Highlights from the Collections of the Hudson River Museum and Art Bridges*

We all live in and are part of a **community** or multiple communities, and these communities take many different forms. Some are in **rural** settings, some are **suburban**, and some are **urban**. Other communities go beyond physical structures or settings and consist of the connections we make with others through shared experiences, emotions, or interests.

Some communities occur in everyday public situations, like being with a crowd of strangers on a bus or at a concert, and other communities are more consistent, personal, and private, like being with your friends at someone's home for a birthday celebration. Communities in contemporary times also take digital form, and we are all in a process of translating our everyday physical gathering spaces into virtual spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This year at the Hudson River Museum, we have been thinking a lot about urban communities, or cities, and what it's like for us as individuals to live in, visit, or be a part of one of these environments. We are also thinking about what it is like for all of us during a period when we need to stay home, and how we can remember and celebrate personally significant moments of being together in our respective communities. We want to share our observations, our feelings, and our artworks with each other.

Look at the artworks on the following page and on the [exhibition webpage](#).

- What is going on in each artwork?
- Look again. What more can you find in the background of the image or beyond the main scene?
- What questions do you have about the works?
- Is there one work that you are particularly drawn to? What is it about the work that makes you connect to it?
- How would you describe the communities that are visible in these cityscapes?
- Compare and contrast the communities represented in these artworks. How are they the same; how are they different?



Clockwise:

Susan Hall (American, b. 1943). *Moving Home*, 1978. Acrylic on paper, mounted on canvas. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Schorr, 1983 (83.19.1). © Susan Hall / Licensed by VAGA at Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York, NY.

Norman Wilfred Lewis (American, 1909–1979). *Untitled (Subway Station)*, 1945. Oil and sand on canvas. On loan from Art Bridges. Art Bridges, © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

Paul Cadmus (American, 1904–1999). *Shore Leave*, 1935. From *Twelve Etchings* published by The Print Cabinet, Connecticut, 1979. Gift of the artist, 1982 (82.10e). © 2019 Estate of Paul Cadmus / Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

Hughie Lee-Smith (American, 1915–1999). *The Walls*, 1954. Oil on board. On loan from Art Bridges. © 2019 Estate of Hughie Lee-Smith / Licensed by VAGA at ARS, NY. Art Bridges, © Estate of Norman W. Lewis; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.



Part 2: Discuss

Think of your own experiences in everyday public spaces, or the built environment.

- Are you alone in those spaces, or with others?
- Do you have an existing relationship to the people around you?
- Are these spaces always accessible?
- What are some unique details of these physical places?

Think of your own experiences in a specific landmark in your life, like a school, church, temple, mosque, favorite restaurant, park, athletic field, workplace, or family space. Today, a landmark may take the form of a personal space in your home, like a particular room or corner.

- Who is present in these spaces with you?
- What is your relationship to others within these spaces?

Reflect on the different group activities that are part of your life.

- What is the focus of each community of people?
- Where do you meet with them, and what do you all have in common that connects you?

Think of what you experience virtually, i.e. with social media, online communities, through FaceTime or your smartphone.

- How are these virtual relationships, interactions, and/or communities different from and similar to those you have in your physical world?
- How have your communities and relationships changed in light of COVID-19 and the reality of social distancing?
- How has access to your community spaces changed?
- How do you feel about shifts in your communities, for example, using the Internet in place of going to school?
- What communities do you want to celebrate and share, and what do you look forward to being part of again in the future?

Part 3: Introducing Norman Lewis

Norman Lewis was born in New York City in 1909, and was a lifelong resident of Harlem. As an artist, Lewis evolved from creating works of **Social Realism** early in his career toward increasingly **abstract** works like *Untitled (Subway Station)*, 1945.

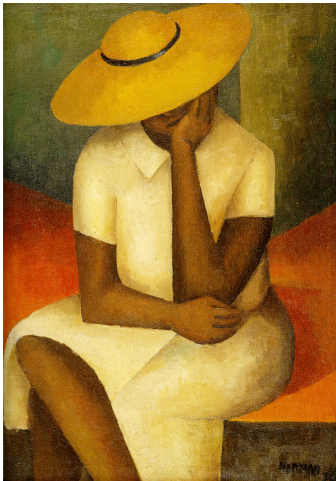
Social Realism is an art movement that developed and grew between the two World Wars in response to the social, economic, and political turmoil and hardships of the period. Events like the 1918 influenza pandemic, the Great Depression, and World Wars I and II affected people worldwide in life-changing ways. Artists created works during this period that responded to and commented on the realities of life at the time.

Notice the difference between how Norman Lewis painted figures versus how Hughie Lee-Smith painted figures in his work *The Walls* from 1954. Lee-Smith worked in a Social Realist style. View these two works and comment on the **mood** or emotions they convey. Why do you think the artists made these choices?

Norman Lewis' artistic practice continued to change throughout the 1940s, and he is now seen as the lone African American painter in the group of artists who developed the style known as **Abstract Expressionism**.

In *Untitled (Subway Station)*, Lewis decided to create a work of art that highlights an everyday occurrence in New York City and other urban settings: standing on a crowded, underground subway platform. Even though waiting for a subway, bus, or train is an everyday activity, it is also a unique feature of life for those who live in urban communities.

This painting includes human figures, but Lewis' **composition** is distorted and **deconstructed** by his experiments with **abstraction**, an artistic approach that does not use explicitly **representational** forms.



Left: Norman Wilfred Lewis (American, 1909–1979). *Girl With Yellow Hat*, 1936. Oil. © Norman Lewis.

Right: Norman Wilfred Lewis (American, 1909–1979). *The Wanderer*, 1933. Oil. © Norman Lewis.

Part 4: Abstraction Warm Up (Activity 1)

Inspiration: Norman Lewis' *Untitled (Subway Station)*, 1945

Duration: 30 minutes

Materials needed:

- Paper
- Pencil

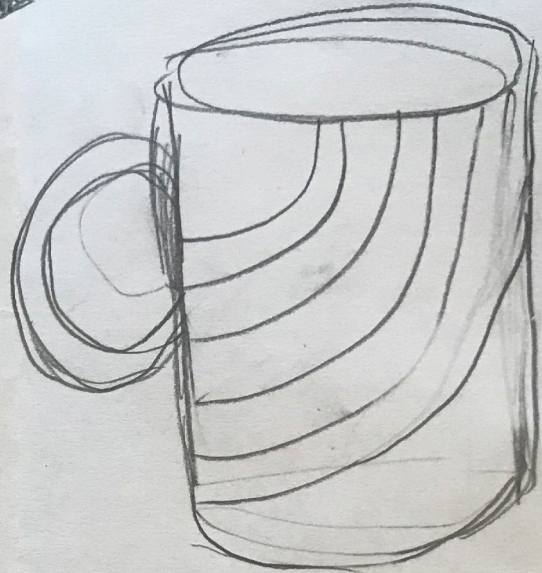
Procedure:

1. Look closely at this image. How many individuals are present on the subway platform? What do you think their relationship(s) to one another might be, if there is any relationship at all? How does the abstraction of the figures influence how you react to and understand the setting in the subway station?
2. Take a piece of paper and fold it in half, and then fold it in half again. Unfold it, and you will have four sections.
3. Choose an object or image to draw from. In the upper left hand section of your paper, draw your chosen subject as realistically as possible. Add contour, shading, and as many details as you can. This is a directly representational drawing.
4. In the bottom left section, represent your chosen subject as simply as you can, using only lines, or as stick figure(s).
5. Fill in the upper right hand section and bottom right hand sections, adding in the steps you need to take to get from a representational to an abstract drawing of your subject. What details, shapes, lines, and/or shading can you remove at each step?

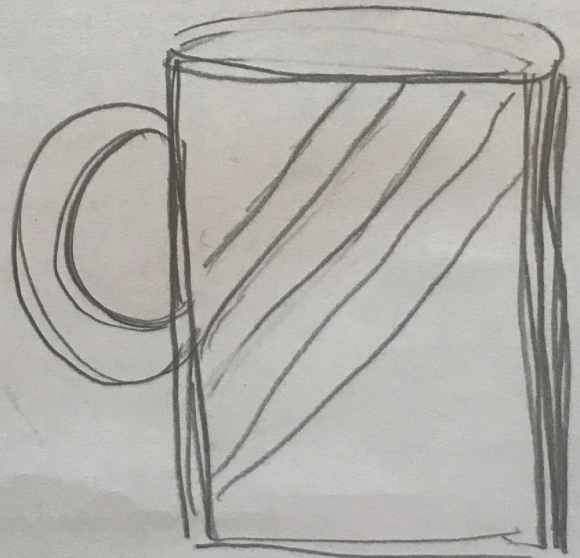
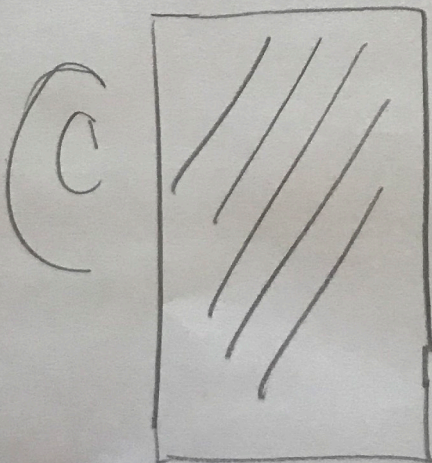
Share your work:

Take a photo of your work and post it to Instagram using the hashtags #MuseumFromHome and #SelfInTheCity, and tag the Museum.

COFFEE MUG



ABSTRACTION MUG,



Part 5: Representing My Own Community (Activity 2)

Inspiration: Norman Lewis' *Untitled (Subway Station)*, 1945

Duration: 30 minutes

Materials needed:

- Paper
- Pencil
- Cardboard or another surface thick enough for collage work
- Scraps from old magazines, newspapers, mail, clothes, or other materials for mixed-media work
- Glue or tape

Procedure:

1. Choose one of the forms of community from your own life as the subject for an abstract work of **collage** art that reflects upon this time of **social isolation**. Abstraction will allow you to use shapes, color, form, and **gesture** in your composition instead of focusing on how a place/person/object appears in reality.
2. Use paper or cardboard as a base for your collage. Old recycled magazines, mail, newspapers, or paper scraps can be used to cut shapes and forms for your composition and can add color and texture. Lewis even incorporated sand into this work, so experiment with unexpected materials if you can!
3. Arrange your collage materials on the surface of your base. When you are done with experimenting and have finalized placement of your media, secure with glue or tape.

Share your work:

Take a photo of your work and post it to Instagram using the hashtags #MuseumFromHome and #SelfInTheCity, and tag the Museum.



Summertime Performances at Untermyer Gardens by Bridget McCormick

Part 6: A Poem Doesn't Need to Be Explained (Activity 3)

Inspiration: Frank O'Hara (American, 1926–1966). *Having a Coke with You*, written in 1960 and excerpted below.

Duration: 30 minutes

Materials needed:

- Paper
- Pencil

Background information:

Frank O'Hara was an American writer, poet, **curator**, and art critic. He was a leading member of the **New York School**, an informal community of American poets, painters, dancers, and musicians active in the 1950s and 1960s in New York City.

O'Hara's poetry is **autobiographical** and casual in form, almost like a journal entry. It tends to be focused on his observations of New York life and his relationships with people in his communities. His writing was deeply influenced by the artworks of **Abstract Expressionist** painters, and it feels spontaneous instead of very carefully written.

Excerpt of *Having a Coke with You*

is even more fun than going to San Sebastian, Irún, Hendaye, Biarritz, Bayonne
or being sick to my stomach on the Travesera de Gracia in Barcelona
partly because in your orange shirt you look like a better happier St. Sebastian
partly because of my love for you, partly because of your love for yoghurt
partly because of the fluorescent orange tulips around the birches
partly because of the secrecy our smiles take on before people and statuary
it is hard to believe when I'm with you that there can be anything as still
as solemn as unpleasantly definitive as statuary when right in front of it
in the warm New York 4 o'clock light we are drifting back and forth
between each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles
and the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint
you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them

Full poem text is available [here](#).

Procedure:

1. Silently read the excerpt from O'Hara's poem *Having a Coke with You*. Note any words, phrases, or descriptions from the poem that stand out to you. If you like, read these words, phrases, descriptions, or lines aloud. Ask yourself the following questions:
 - What do you notice about the poem's structure?
 - What do you notice about its grammar?
 - What do you notice about its rhythm or flow?
 - How does it feel to read the poem silently and/or to read sections aloud?
2. Social distancing has affected all of us in significant ways. Write your own poem inspired by O'Hara's poetic form in response to a community or personal relationship that you want to celebrate. (If you completed the "Representing My Own Community" activity, you could even write a poem in response to your abstract collage!) Begin by freewriting, or writing without constraint. Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, rhyming, or a chronology in your words.
 - What comes to mind when you think of the community or relationship you've depicted through collage, or that is part of your life?
 - What emotions do you feel?
 - What memories do you have of people or places that are part of this community?
 - What details about the built environment can you include if it is a community that meets or gathers in a physical space?
 - What details can you include if the community is virtual, on social media, or otherwise found online or in digital format?
3. This freewrite can be your poem, or you can return to it to reorganize lines, phrases, words and/or to add further details and descriptions.

Share your work:

Take a photo of your poem and post it to Instagram using the hashtags #MuseumFromHome and #SelfInTheCity, and tag the Museum.



Summertime Performances at Untermyer Gardens by Bridget McCormick

Sitting in an alcove at Untermyer Gardens
The sun is usually hot even at this time of the day
When it starts to slip behind the Palisades. But there are pockets of shade
Keeping us cool before the show starts. The dancers stretch behind the columns
The two winged creatures atop have a better view than we do
But it doesn't matter when anywhere you look nature is performing
You can't miss it. Flowers and leaves, vines and trees twisting around
And the bubbling sound of the streams filling the pauses between songs

Part 7: Glossary and Further Reading

Abstract: Describes something that exists in thought or as an idea that does not have a physical or concrete existence.

Abstract art: Art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality but instead uses shapes, colors, forms and gestural marks to achieve its effect.

Abstract Expressionism: The term applied to new forms of abstract art developed by American painters after World War II, often characterised by gestural brush-strokes or mark-making, and the impression of spontaneity.

Autobiographical: Written work dealing with the writer's own life.

Built environment: The human-made environment that provides the setting for human activity, ranging in scale from buildings to cities and beyond.

Cityscape: An image with urban scenery as its primary focus; an urban environment.

Collage: A mixed-media artistic composition made of various materials (such as paper, cloth, or wood) glued on a surface.

Community: A group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common.

Composition: The placement or arrangement of the visual elements in a work of art, such as figures, trees, buildings, landforms, etc.

Contour: In visual art, the contour line defines the outline of a form, as well as interior structure, without the use of shading.

Curator: Someone who is responsible for assembling, cataloguing, managing and presenting/displaying artistic and cultural collections.

Deconstructed: When something - such as a figure or object - is reduced to its constituent parts in order to reinterpret it.

Environment: The surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates; the natural world, as a whole or in a particular geographical area, especially as affected by human activity.

Gesture: A movement that expresses an idea; in art, how the artist expresses emotion, movement, and expression through marks on an artistic surface.

Landmark: A building or place that is easily recognized/personally significant, especially one that you can use to identify where you are and who you are.

Mixed media: An artwork in which more than one medium or material has been employed.

Mood: In art appreciation, the general atmosphere, or state of mind and feelings, that a work of art generates.

New York School: The New York School was an informal group of American poets, painters, dancers, and musicians active in the 1950s and 1960s in New York City.

Representational: Images in art that are clearly recognizable for what they purport to be, such as a human figure, a banana, a tree, and so on.

Rural: An area that is in, related to, or similar in detail to the countryside instead of a town or city. Rural areas have fewer people in them than suburban or urban areas, and residences are usually far apart.

Shading: The lines and marks used in a drawing or painting to show the different patterns in color and dark areas. Shading helps to illustrate depth, or 3D elements, on paper.

Social distancing: Keeping space between yourself and other people outside of your home. A mandate across much of the world during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social Realism: An art movement that flourished between the two World Wars in response to the social, economic, and political turmoil and hardships of the period.

Suburban: An area that is smaller and located outside of an urban area, with more homes, buildings, and a larger population of people than a rural area.

Surrealism: A twentieth-century avant-garde movement in art and literature that sought to release the creative potential of the unconscious mind and dreams, for example by the irrational juxtaposition of images.

Urban: An area that is connected with a town or city, where there are many buildings and structures close together and a large population of people.

HRM's *Self in the City*

<https://www.hrm.org/exhibitions/self-in-the-city/>

Art Bridges Foundation

<https://artbridgesfoundation.org/>

Academy of American Poets / poets.org Database

<https://poets.org/>

Poetry Foundation

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>