

## **Wassily Kandinsky**

**Born:** December 4, 1866 - Moscow, Russia

**Died:** December 13, 1944 - Neuilly-sur-Seine, France

One of the pioneers of abstract modern art, Wassily Kandinsky exploited the evocative interrelation between colour and form to create an aesthetic experience that engaged the sight, sound, and emotions of the public. He believed that total abstraction offered the possibility for profound, transcendental expression and that copying from nature only interfered with this process.

Highly inspired to create art that communicated a universal sense of spirituality, he innovated a pictorial language that only loosely related to the outside world but expressed volumes about the artist's inner experience. His visual vocabulary developed through three phases, shifting from his early, representational canvases and their divine symbolism to his rapturous and operatic compositions, to his late, geometric, and biomorphic flat planes of colour. Kandinsky's art and ideas inspired many generations of artists, from his students at the Bauhaus to the Abstract Expressionists after World War II.

### **Accomplishments**

Painting was, above all, deeply spiritual for Kandinsky. He sought to convey profound spirituality and the depth of human emotion through a universal visual language of abstract forms and colours that transcended cultural and physical boundaries.

Kandinsky viewed non-objective, abstract art as the ideal visual mode to express the "inner necessity" of the artist and to convey universal human emotions and ideas. He viewed himself as a prophet whose mission was to share this ideal with the world for the betterment of society.

Kandinsky viewed music as the most transcendent form of non-objective art - musicians could evoke images in listeners' minds merely with sounds. He strove to produce similarly object-free, spiritually rich paintings that alluded to sounds and emotions through a unity of sensation.

### **Composition VII 1913**

Commonly cited as the pinnacle of Kandinsky's pre-World War I achievement, Composition VII shows the artist's rejection of pictorial representation through a swirling hurricane of colours and shapes. The operatic and tumultuous roiling of forms around the canvas exemplifies Kandinsky's belief that painting could evoke sounds the way music called to mind certain colours and forms. Even the title, Composition VII, aligned with his interest in the intertwining of the musical with the visual and emphasized Kandinsky's non-representational focus in this work. As the different colours and symbols spiral around each other, Kandinsky eliminated traditional references to depth and laid bare the different abstracted glyphs in order to communicate deeper themes and emotions common to all cultures and viewers.

Preoccupied by the theme of apocalypse and redemption throughout the 1910s, Kandinsky formally tied the whirling composition of the painting to the theme of the cyclical processes of destruction and salvation.

Despite the seemingly non-objective nature of the work, Kandinsky maintained several symbolic references in this painting. Among the various forms that built Kandinsky's visual vocabulary, he painted glyphs of boats with oars, mountains, and figures. However, he did not intend for viewers to read these symbols literally and instead imbued his paintings with multiple references to the Last Judgment, the Deluge, and the Garden of Eden, seemingly all at once.

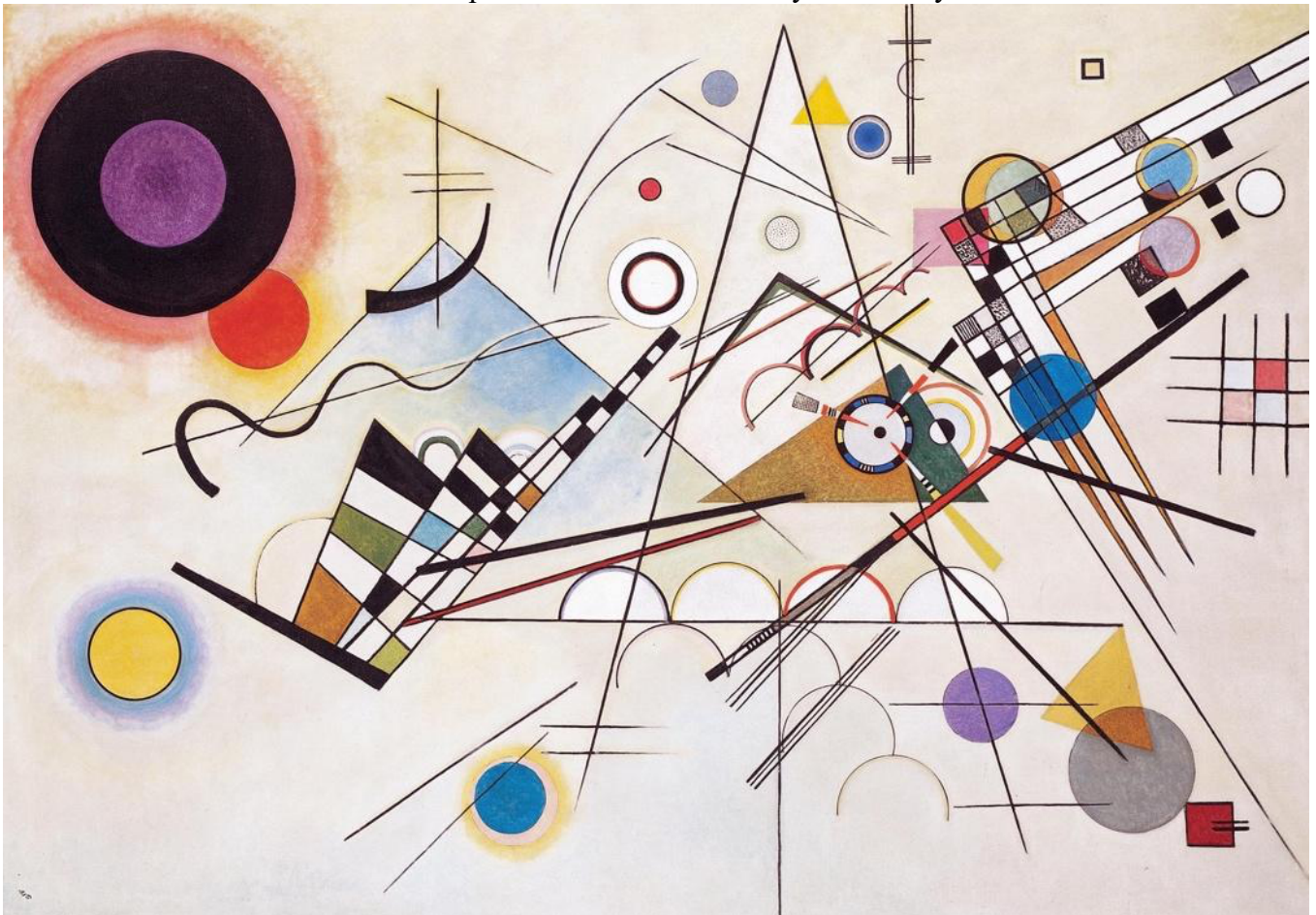
### **Composition VIII 1923**

The rational, geometric order of Composition VIII is a polar opposite of the operatic composition of Composition VII (1913). Painted while he taught at the Bauhaus, this work illustrates how Kandinsky synthesized elements from Suprematism, Constructivism, and the school's own ethos. By combining aspects of all three movements, he arrived at the flat planes of colour and the clear, linear quality seen in this work. Form, as opposed to colour, structured the painting in a dynamic balance that pulses throughout the canvas. This work is an expression of Kandinsky's clarified ideas about modern, non-objective art, particularly the significance of shapes like triangles, circles, and the checkerboard. Kandinsky relied upon a hard-edged style to communicate the deeper content of his work for the rest of his career.

Composition VII 1913 Wassily Kandinsky



Composition VIII 1923 Wassily Kandinsky





## Activity

Inspired by the work of Elaine de Kooning.

Using long extension sticks, each group will create a unique piece of artwork.

Each group should pick a theme (e.g., nature, movement) and use their sticks to express the theme through line and form.

The sticks should create angular and curved lines and geometric shapes. Each group's artwork should become part of a larger composition, individual ideas and energies.

Consider and discuss the theme of the artwork and the overall composition before displaying your final product and consider a title as a group. Have fun, and enjoy the creative process!



Elaine de Kooning, *Bullfight*, 1959



Elaine de Kooning, *Willem de Kooning*, c. 1952



**Elaine de Kooning *Bacchus***

## Summary of Willem de Kooning

---

One of the most prominent and celebrated of the Abstract Expressionist painters, Willem de Kooning's pictures typify the vigorous, gestural style of the movement. Perhaps more than any of his contemporaries, he developed a radically abstract style of painting that fused Cubism, Surrealism and Expressionism. While many of his colleagues moved from figuration to abstraction, de Kooning always painted figures, most notably women, and abstractions concurrently, making no distinction between the art historical categories. De Kooning's real subject, he insisted, was space and the figure-ground relation.

De Kooning fused abstraction, figuration, and landscapes in various ways throughout the many long decades of his career, and his unceasing journey to find new forms and subjects made his overall output more eclectic than most of his colleagues. His engagement with popular culture was also unique and informed a host of post-war artists from the Neo-Dadaism of Robert Rauschenberg to the Pop Art of James Rosenquist, and younger painters such as Cecily Brown have explored the gestural eroticism of his later paintings.

## Accomplishments

---

- Unlike most of his colleagues, de Kooning never fully abandoned the depiction of the human figure. His paintings of women feature a unique blend of gestural abstraction and figuration. Heavily influenced by the Cubism of Picasso, de Kooning became a master at ambiguously blending figure and ground in his pictures while dismembering, re-assembling, and distorting his figures in the process.
- Although known for continually reworking his canvases, de Kooning often left them with a sense of dynamic incompleteness, as if the forms were still in the process of moving and settling and coming into definition. In this sense, his paintings exemplify Harold Rosenberg's definition of Action Painting - the painting is an event, an encounter between the artist and the materials, rather than a finished work in the traditional sense.
- Although he came to embody the popular image of the macho, hard-drinking artist, de Kooning approached his art with careful thought and was considered one of the most knowledgeable among the artists associated with the New York School. He possessed great facility, having been formally trained as a young man, and while he looked to the Modern masters like Picasso, Matisse, and Miró, he equally admired the likes of Ingres, Rubens, and Rembrandt.

## Elaine de Kooning

---

An energetic and generous person, Elaine de Kooning expanded the realm of what is normally considered Abstract Expressionism with her sensitively painted and dynamic portraits of friends, athletes, and even a President of the United States. She was a prolific artist, art critic, portraitist, and teacher during the height of the Abstract Expressionist era and well beyond. Mixing abstraction and



representation in much of her work, de Kooning took inspiration not only from those around her, but from bullfights, sculpture, and cave paintings.

Although her early career was overshadowed by that of her husband, Willem de Kooning, Elaine's artistic range, vast knowledge of media, and influence on fellow artists was undeniable. Elaine de Kooning's work continues to receive increasing critical attention and find its place among her New York School peers.

### **Accomplishments**

- De Kooning took to heart the ideas of Action Painting, not only in painting in a gestural style, but in the desire to immerse herself in and identify herself with her subject. While she did paint abstract canvases, much of her work is rooted in the everyday reality of the life that she lived and experienced.
- In her portraiture, de Kooning was less keen on rendering exact likenesses as in traditional portraiture, and instead strove to capture the person's style, that thing which makes him or her immediately recognizable to their friends and acquaintances. From a whirl of gestural brushstrokes, a recognizable countenance emerges, and one senses the reinvigoration of the portrait tradition.
- Her depiction of male sexuality upended the more typical scenario of male artist and female subjects and challenged contemporary gender power dynamics and male privilege. Additionally, her insistence on an open relationship with her husband and her hard drinking and smoking transgressed societal norms for what it meant to be a wife at the time.

### **Coincider these questions while watching the Video.**

Answer in Pairs.

Discuss as a Class.

Who was Elaine de Kooning?

---

What did she achieve in her life?

---

When did she live?

---

How did Elaine de Kooning's work influence American art?

---

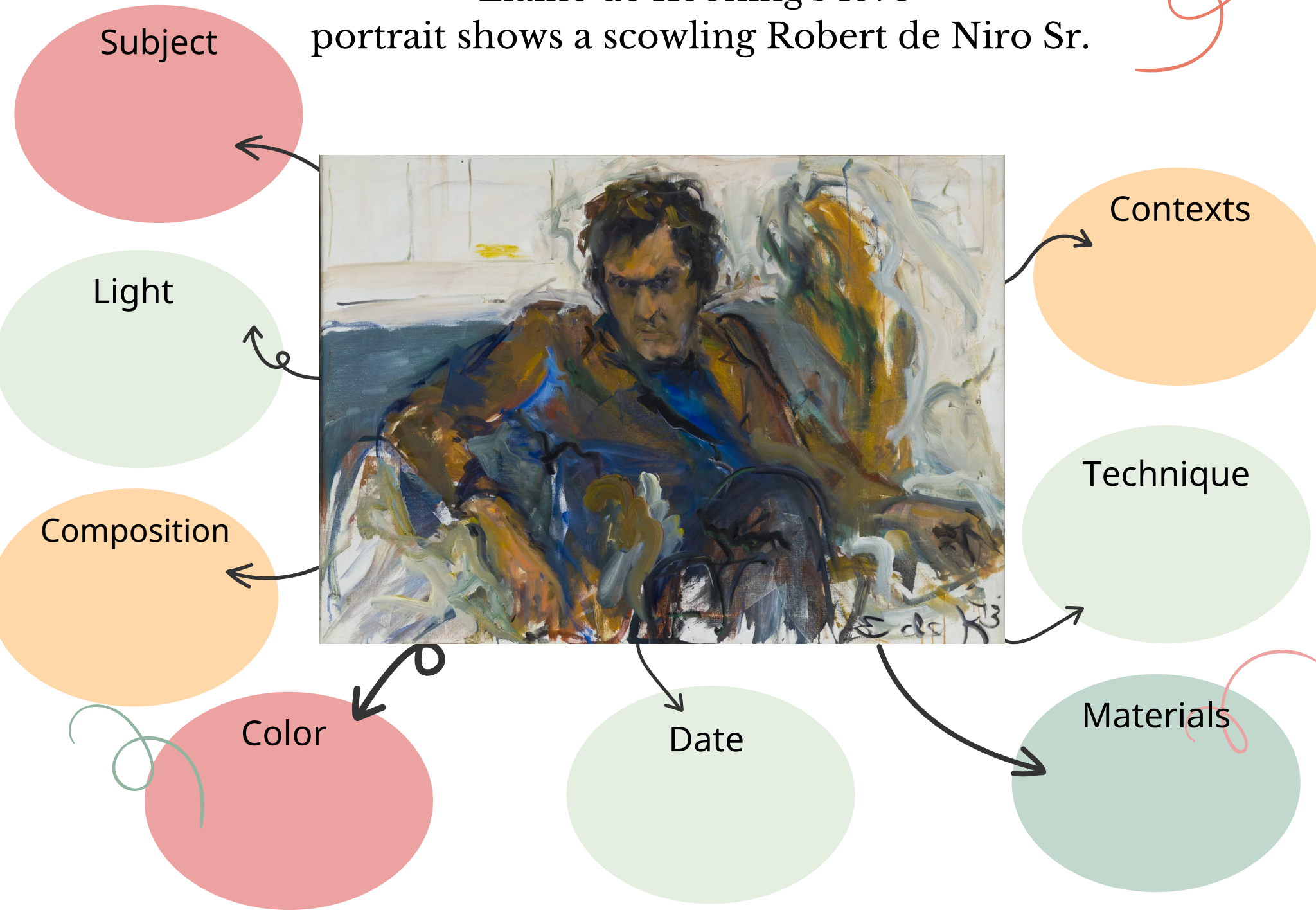
What was her relationship to her husband, Willem de Kooning?

---

How did Elaine de Kooning contribute to the progress of gender equality?

---

Elaine de Kooning's 1973  
portrait shows a scowling Robert de Niro Sr.







**Examine this painting and discuss why our attention is focused more on the family members than the dying girl herself. How has the artist used gesture, facial expression, and colours to create emotion?**

## Joan Miró

### Accomplishments

Via his own Surrealism-inspired exploration, Miró invented a new kind of pictorial space in which carefully rendered objects issuing strictly from the artist's imagination became juxtaposed with basic, recognizable forms. His use of interior emotion to drive abstract expression would become a great influence on the Abstract Expressionists.

Even though he pared his forms to abstract schematics or pictorial signs and gestures Miró's art never settled into complete non-objectivity. Rather, he devoted his career to exploring various means by which to dismantle traditional precepts of representation.

Miró balanced the kind of spontaneity and automatism encouraged by the Surrealists with meticulous planning and rendering to achieve finished works that, because of their precision, seemed plausibly representational despite their considerable level of abstraction.

Miró often worked with a limited palette, yet the colours he used were bold and expressive. His chromatic explorations, which emphasized the potential of fields of unblended colour to respond to one another, as well as his flat backgrounds with mild gradations of colour, were valuable resources, providing inspiration for Colour Field painters such as Helen Frankenthaler.

Miró was a modern renegade who refused to limit himself to visual exploration in a single medium. While he explored certain themes such as that of Mother and Child repeatedly throughout his long career, he did so in a variety of media from painting and printmaking to sculpture and ceramics, often achieving surprising and disparate results.

### 1924-25

#### Harlequin's Carnival

This painting depicts a festive and crowded scene where quixotic biomorphs seem to be caught up in a lively celebration. Every form evokes resemblances and refuses them. At centre left, the harlequin, identified by the black and white checks of the costume of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*'s stock figure, has a body shaped like a distorted guitar. The cat, at lower right, stands up on its hind legs as if dancing, its "arms" held out to the scene, while its red and yellow face turns to look at the viewer. A yellow and black fish lies on the table, an ear and an eye grow out of the ladder on the left, music notes appear on the wall, black and white snakelike tubes cross in the centre, and many of the forms are connected by thin scrolling lines, as the black and yellow creature dancing in the lower centre grasps a thread that extends to the cat's whiskers. The viewer is caught up in this imagined world, intrigued by the dissonance between identification and meaning.

An early example of the artist's turn toward Surrealism, this work pioneered his use of biomorphic forms, as most objects evoke living organisms. He explained some of the painting's symbolic meaning, saying that the black triangle symbolised the Eiffel Tower and the ladder represented elevation and evasion. Yet the merging and melding forms overturn the certainties of the conscious world, including those of art; as the artist said, "I'm only interested in anonymous art, the kind that springs from the collective unconscious." Miró never wanted to settle into a particular artistic style and strove to overturn aesthetic hierarchies. In this work he created his pictorial idiom. As art critic Laura Cummings wrote, "When Miró died in 1983, at the age of 90, he had long been cherished as the last of the modernist stars. His pictorial language was singular, instantly recognisable and- quite rightly  
*Oil on canvas - Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York*





1929

### The Treachery of Images

The Treachery of Images cleverly highlights the gap between language and meaning. Magritte combined the words and image in such a fashion that he forces us to question the importance of the sentence and the word. "Pipe," for instance, is no more an actual pipe than a picture of a pipe can be smoked

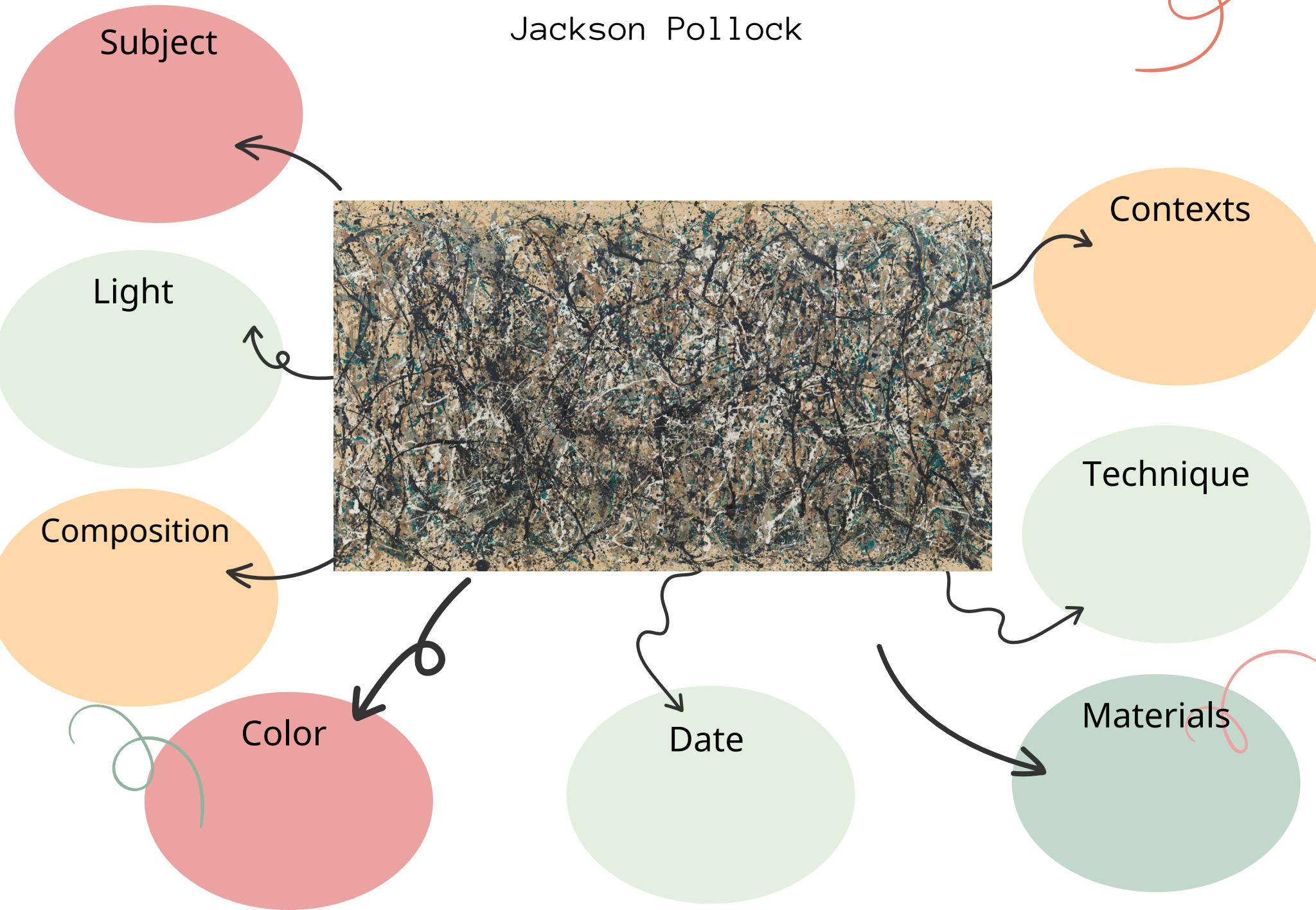
Oil on canvas- Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Like the other artists and poets associated with the Surrealist movement, Magritte sought to overthrow what he saw as the oppressive rationalism of bourgeois society. His art during these essential years is at times violent, frequently disturbing, and filled with discontinuities. He consistently interrogated conventions of language and visual representation, using methods that included the misnaming of objects, doubling and repetition, mirroring and concealment, and the depiction of visions seen in half-waking states-all of them devices that cast doubt on the nature of appearances, both in the paintings and, itself. The persistent tension Magritte maintained during these years between nature and artifice, truth and fiction, reality and surrealist is one of the profound achievements of his art. Along with Persistence of Memory by Salvador Dali, The Treachery of Images has become the most iconic image of Surrealism Movement.

Surely the most celebrated Belgian artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, René Magritte has achieved great popular acclaim for his idiosyncratic approach to Surrealism. To support himself he spent many years working as a commercial artist, producing advertising and book designs, and this most likely shaped his fine art, which often has the abbreviated impact of an advertisement. While some French Surrealists led ostentatious lives, Magritte preferred the quiet anonymity of a middle-class existence, a life symbolized by the bowler-hatted men that often populate his pictures. In later years, he was castigated by his peers for some of his strategies (such as his tendency to produce multiple copies of his pictures), yet since his death his reputation has only improved. Conceptual artists have admired his use of text in images, and painters in the 1980s admired the provocative kitsch of some of his later work.

# Action Painting I

## Jackson Pollock





# Persistence of Memory

## Salvador Dali

Subject

Light

Composition

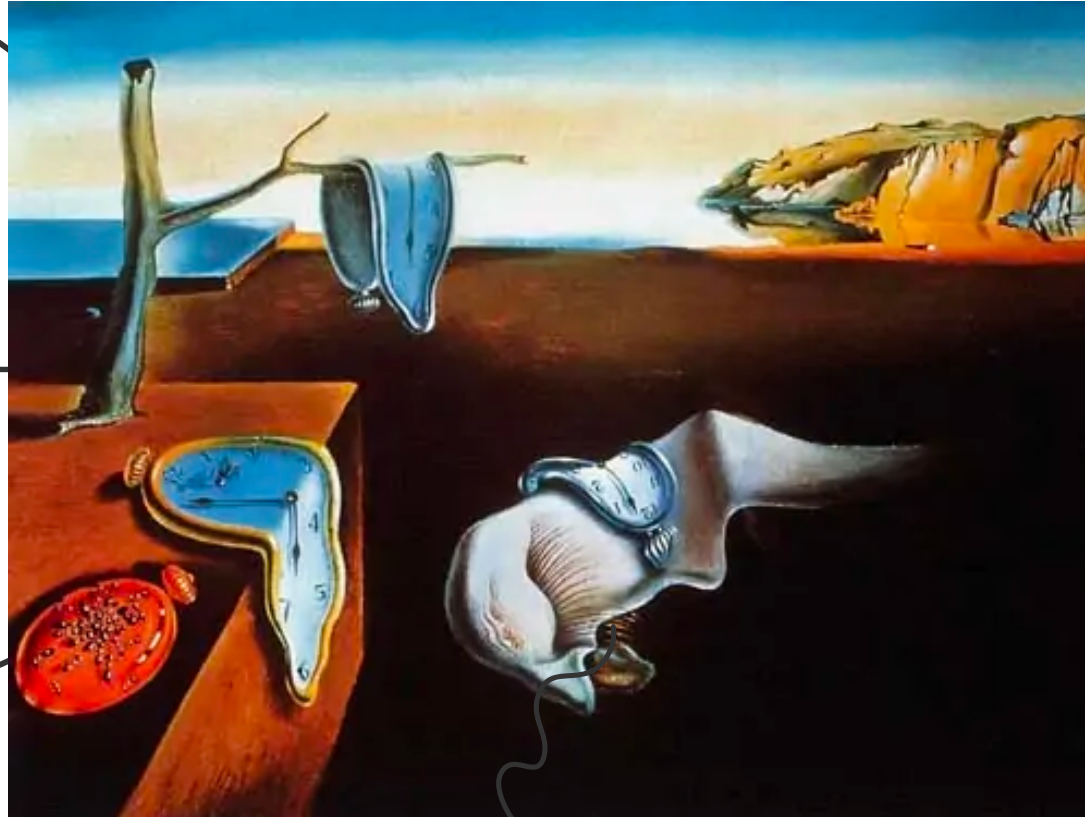
Color

Date

Contexts

Technique

Materials



Subject

Fountain  
Marcell Duchamp

Form

Context

Scale

Material

Location





# Carnaval d'Arlequin(Harlequin's Carnival)

Joan Miró



Subject

Light

Composition

Color

Date

Contexts

Technique

Materials

*Impression III (Concert)* is a visual depiction of the music of Arnold Schoenberg after Kandinsky attended a performance in Munich in 1911. What musical words would you use to describe the work? Can you identify any musical instruments?

