

# Art Deco: The U.S. Enters the 1920s

## Basic Information

**Grade Level:** 6–8

**Subject Area:** Visual Arts, Social Studies, U.S. History

**Time Required:** 3 or 4 sessions

**Student Skills Developed:** Making inferences and drawing conclusions, comparison and contrast, descriptive writing, analyzing visual composition to determine meaning

## Artworks

### Newark Museum Collection

Minna Citron

Born 1896, Newark, New Jersey

Died 1991, New York, New York

*Staten Island Ferry*, 1937

oil on Masonite

Purchase 1939 Felix Fuld Bequest Fund, 39.198

### National Endowment for the Humanities, *Picturing America Collection*

William Van Alen (1883–1954)

The Chrysler Building

Manhattan, 1930

Photographic print

Library of Congress

Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

## Introduction

As sleek, shiny metal replaced wood in cars and airplanes, Art Deco's stylized, geometric forms captured America's craze for speed and design. In this lesson, students learn about 1920s and 1930s design and how architects and artists expressed the Machine Age ideals in their works. Students study William Van Alen's Art Deco-style Chrysler Building and Minna Citron's painting *Staten Island Ferry*. They compare the depiction of the Chrysler Building in each and its impact on those viewing Manhattan's skyline at the time. Students will demonstrate their understanding by writing a narrative based on art.

## Guiding Questions

- + How did American transportation change during the early twentieth century?
- + How did artists and architects express America's enthusiasm for speed and mass production in their designs?

## Learning Objectives

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- + Describe American design in the 1920s and 1930s.
- + Identify hallmarks of the Art Deco style in design.
- + Write a narrative based on art.
- + Explain how artists and architects included references to Machine Age mass production and America's fascination with speed.

## Background Information for the Teacher

### ***Automobiles***

At the beginning of the twentieth century, cars were fragile, expensive toys for the wealthy. But when Henry Ford began mass-producing Model Ts on his conveyor-belt assembly line in 1913, they became affordable to the middle class. Fifteen million Model Ts had been produced by 1927. Except in cities, roads were in such poor condition and drivers were so bad that travel was still slow and dangerous. Gradually, state legislatures passed laws to fund road construction, enforce traffic rules, and license cars and drivers. Only one-sixth of rural roads were paved in 1904, but by 1935 more than twice that had some surfacing. During the 1930s, America's first transcontinental highway, the Lincoln Highway, between New York and California, was completely paved. By 1930, more than half of American families owned a car.

For more information, videos, and learning resources, visit the National Museum of American History's website, America on the Move <http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/>.

### ***William Van Alen (1883–1954) and the Chrysler Building***

As America's economy flourished during the roaring 1920s, wealthy businessmen raced to build ever taller skyscrapers. Walter P. Chrysler, head of the company manufacturing Chrysler automobiles, challenged architect William Van Alen to build him the tallest building in New York. Brooklyn-born Van Alen studied at Pratt Institute, in New York, won a scholarship to study in Paris, and was known for his flamboyant modern designs.

Like many modern European and American architects and designers, Van Alen embraced the Art Deco style. With its stylized, abstracted, natural forms

and repeated geometric shapes, it lent itself to mass production and architecture. Art Deco designs were often metal, plastic, or glass, with bright colors. This decorative design style was influenced by Cubism's simplification of forms, Futurism's movement, and Constructionism's architectural feel.

Walter Chrysler asked for "a bold structure, declaring the glories of the modern age." The metal-topped Art Deco-style Chrysler Building features Chrysler automobile hood ornaments, hubcaps, and stylized eagle gargoyles reminiscent of Gothic drainspouts. When the Chrysler Building was completed, in 1930, it was the tallest skyscraper in Manhattan, but the Empire State Building topped it in 1931. Unfortunately, as the Great Depression took hold and Chrysler balked at paying Van Alen, this was the architect's last major construction.

Learn more about William Van Alen and how he secretly assembled and installed the crowning steel tip to ensure that his seventy-seven-story building was Manhattan's tallest skyscraper in *Picturing America Teachers Resource Book*, 15b, *The Chrysler Building*  
[http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource\\_Guide\\_Chapters/PictAmer\\_Resource\\_Book\\_Chapter\\_15B.pdf](http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource_Guide_Chapters/PictAmer_Resource_Book_Chapter_15B.pdf).

### ***Minna Citron***

Minna Citron was a member of the Fourteenth Street School, a group of Realist artists that included Kenneth Hayes Miller, Reginald Marsh, and Isabel Bishop. These artists worked in and around Fourteenth Street and Union Square, in New York City. Citron's work demonstrates her lifelong interest in women's independence. At the center of *Staten Island Ferry* stands a woman wearing a belted, bright blue dress, a style commonly worn by female office workers at the time. She directs the attention of her younger companion to the soaring skyline of New York, which can be seen as a symbol of opportunity. Citron draws the viewer's attention to the woman's red bag; the bag may suggest her self-sufficiency and control over her own financial resources.

### **Preparing to Teach This Lesson**

- + Review the lesson plan and the websites used throughout.
- + Locate and bookmark suggested materials and websites.
- + Download and print out documents you will use, and duplicate copies as necessary for student viewing.
- + Students can access the primary source materials and some of the activity materials via the EDSITEment LaunchPad.

## Lesson Plan Activities

1. Look and Think Worksheet—The Chrysler Building and Airport Structure.
2. Analyze Minna Citron's Staten Island Ferry
3. Write a narrative based on a trip to New York City in the 1920s that includes the Chrysler Building, automobiles, and airplanes.

# Lesson Activity 1

## Look and Think Activity:

### **The Chrysler Building and Chrysler Autos**

Show students the short (less than six minutes) *Picturing America on Screen* video about the Chrysler Building, [http://www.thirteen.org/picturing-america/chrysler-building/#.Ui9wwRZu\\_A5](http://www.thirteen.org/picturing-america/chrysler-building/#.Ui9wwRZu_A5)

To conduct a more in-depth discussion of this building, each student should be able to see a large, clear image of the Chrysler Building and closeups of its ornamentation. Such an image may be downloaded from the Picturing America Educators Resources, Images for Classroom (Powerpoint), slide 15b. <http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/educators.php>

After students have seen the video, ask:

- + What is surprising about this building?
- + How is it different from most office buildings?
- + How would you describe the overall shape of this building?
- + Notice how your eye is directed up the whole height of this building. How does the alignment of the windows contribute to this movement?
- + What else would you like to know about the Chrysler Building and its designer?

See information about the Chrysler Building on page 68 in the Picturing America Teachers Resource Book.

[http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource\\_Guide\\_Chapters/PictAmer\\_Resource\\_Book\\_Chapter\\_15B.pdf](http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource_Guide_Chapters/PictAmer_Resource_Book_Chapter_15B.pdf)

Point out that the top of the building is narrower than the lower stories. The building has a series of setbacks at the sixteenth, twenty-third, and thirtieth floors. New York City building regulations required that upper levels of tall buildings become narrower so that sunlight could reach the streets around these huge buildings. This one is seventy-seven floors and 1,046 feet high.

A stylized Egyptian papyrus plant decorates the elevator door. Howard Carter discovered King Tut's tomb in 1922, and by 1926 New Yorkers were still interested in anything Egyptian.

### **Comparing Chrysler and Chrysler**

Show students images of 1920s Chrysler automobiles, such as the ones found at:

[http://www.oldcarbrochures.org/NA/Chrysler\\_and\\_Imperial/1926\\_Chrysler/1926\\_Chrysler\\_Brochure](http://www.oldcarbrochures.org/NA/Chrysler_and_Imperial/1926_Chrysler/1926_Chrysler_Brochure)

Encourage students to find references to these cars on the Chrysler Building. About halfway up, giant winged radiator caps, similar to those on 1926

Chryslers, grace the building's corners. Look for circular hubcaps behind these. The triangular windows in the crowning metal scallops suggest spoked wheels. Van Alen relates this fixed building to the shiny metal car.

Explain to students that the Chrysler Building is considered an excellent example of Art Deco design.

## Lesson Activity 2

### The Chrysler Building's Impact on the New York City Skyline

Show students Minna Citron's painting *Staten Island Ferry*.

Using a guided questioning approach, ask students:

- + What is happening in this artwork?
- + What do you see that makes you say that?
- + Where could this setting be? What makes you say that?
- + Who are these people, and what are they doing?

Have students identify buildings in the skyline that they recognize. Compare the image of the Chrysler Building in this artwork to the photographs they just observed.

Ask students what these people could have observed about the skyline. If they were traveling on this ferry into New York City, what would they be thinking?

Have students write a narrative letter describing their experience on the Staten Island Ferry, making sure they include the Chrysler Building in their experience.

# NARRATIVE WRITING

## MY TRIP ON THE STATEN ISLAND FERRY

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Minna Citron depicts New York City in her painting *Staten Island Ferry*. The figures in the artwork are all shown actively engaged in the moment. If you were one of them, what would you be thinking, doing, and feeling?

In the space below, write a letter to someone from the perspective of one of the figures in the artwork. Be sure to include your impressions of the Chrysler Building and what it means to you at this moment.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



## Extending the Lesson

- + Read *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald (1925), to understand the role of cars and speed in the 1920s Jazz Age lifestyles of the rich.
- + Construct a Machine Age sculpture from scrap-metal parts and hardware. Depending on the size of the recycled objects, join them together with wire, hot glue, or solder.
- + Assign students to read “Can We Be Both Lighthearted and Serious? The Chrysler Building Shows How!,” an essay by Anthony C. Romeo, A.I.A., <http://www.beautyofnyc.org/ChryslerBldg.pdf>. Ask them to explain their answer to the title’s question.

## Resources

### Selected NEH EDSITEment Websites

William Van Alen, The Chrysler Building, 15b  
Picturing America Teachers Resource Book  
[http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource\\_Guide\\_Chapters/PictAmer\\_Resource\\_Book\\_Chapter\\_15B.pdf](http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/downloads/pdfs/Resource_Guide_Chapters/PictAmer_Resource_Book_Chapter_15B.pdf)

The Chrysler Building  
Picturing America on Screen  
[http://www.thirteen.org/picturing-america/chrysler-building/#.Uh9meRZu\\_A4](http://www.thirteen.org/picturing-america/chrysler-building/#.Uh9meRZu_A4)

America on the Move  
Smithsonian National Museum of American History  
<http://amhistory.si.edu/onthemove/>

PBS Series  
Chasing the Sun  
Aviation history seen through the eyes of its innovators  
[http://www.pbs.org/kcet/chasingthesun/series/series\\_1.html](http://www.pbs.org/kcet/chasingthesun/series/series_1.html)

Wonders of the World databank—Skyscraper, Chrysler Building  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/buildingbig/wonder/structure/chrysler.html>

Library of Congress  
Teacher's Guide: The Industrial Revolution  
[www.loc.gov/teachers/.../industrial-revolution/pdf/teacher\\_guide.pdf](http://www.loc.gov/teachers/.../industrial-revolution/pdf/teacher_guide.pdf)

Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum  
Airmail to Airlines—Teacher Guide  
<http://airandspace.si.edu/files/pdf/explore-and-learn/teaching-posters/airmail.pdf>

## Selected EDSITEment Lesson Plans

Carl Sandburg's "Chicago": Bringing a Great City Alive

Egyptian Symbols and Figures: Scroll Paintings

Thomas Edison's Inventions in the 1900s and Today: From "New" to You!

Edith Wharton: War Correspondent

## Standards Alignment

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.8.7** Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different media (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.2** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

**CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own ideas clearly and persuasively.

National standards for Visual Arts Education:

**Grades 9–12 Content Standard 2**

Using knowledge of structures and functions

**Grades 9–12 Content Standard 3**

Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

**Grades 9–12 Content Standard 4**

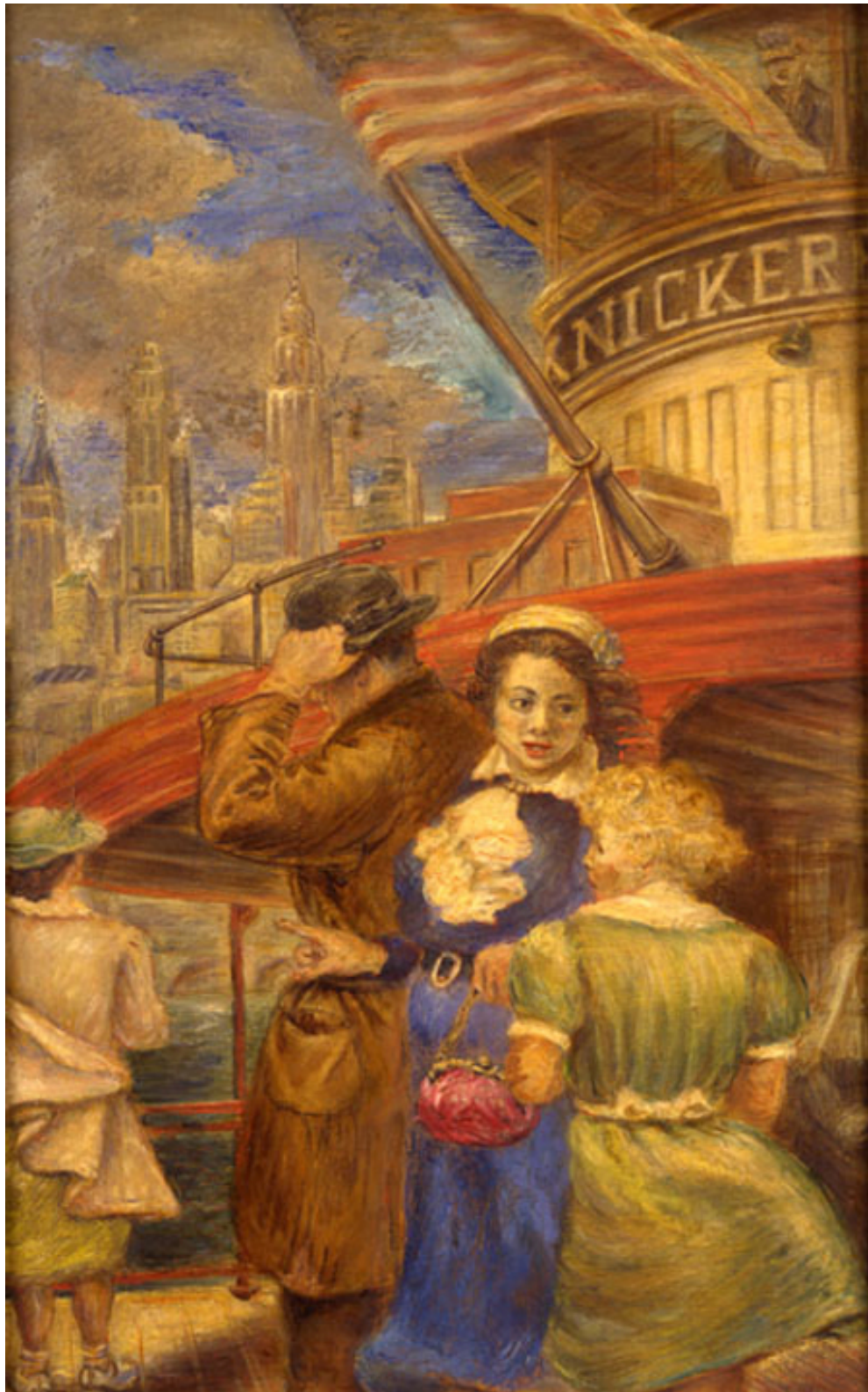
Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures

**Grades 9–12 Content Standard 6**

Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

# Minna Citron

Born 1896, Newark, New Jersey  
Died 1991, New York, New York  
*Staten Island Ferry*, 1937  
oil on Masonite  
Purchase 1939 Felix Fuld Bequest  
Fund, 39.198



# William Van Alen

The Chrysler Building  
Manhattan, 1930  
Photographic print  
Library of Congress  
Prints and Photographs Division,  
Washington, D.C.



15-b.4



15-b.1



15-b.2



15-b.5



15-b.3

## 15b WILLIAM VAN ALEN The Chrysler Building, 1926-1930

