

birth of the COOL

CALIFORNIA ART, DESIGN,
AND CULTURE AT MIDCENTURY

Pre-Visit Activities for High School Students



orange

COUNTY
MUSEUM
OF ART

850 San Clemente Drive Newport Beach CA 92660 949-759-1122 www.ocma.net



This pre-visit activity will help prepare your students for their museum visit to see the exhibition *Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury*. This exhibition focuses on art, design, architecture, and music created in Southern California during the 1950s, and the relationships among these disciplines. During this era, jazz musicians popularized the use of the term “cool” to connote excellence or sophistication. Taking its title from Miles Davis’ seminal album of the same name, *Birth of the Cool* explores the expression of a cool aesthetic in 1950s art and culture. The impact of these art practices on contemporary culture has been widespread, and today we associate the styles of this period with beauty, sophistication, and confidence. When you visit the museum, your students will see “cool” objects, hear cool jazz, and think about what cool means today. Your museum visit and pre-visit activity support interdisciplinary learning by connecting Visual Art, Language Arts, and Social Studies content areas, and address the California State Content Standards in the Visual Arts.

- 1.0 Artistic Perception
- 2.0 Creative Expression
- 3.0 Historical and Cultural Context
- 4.0 Aesthetic Valuing
- 5.0 Connections, Relationships, Applications

Please adapt these activities according to your classroom needs.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

Students will prepare for their visit of *Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury* by investigating featured artworks in the exhibition including music, painting, and architectural photography. Students will employ the language of the principles of art to describe each artwork, and make connections between art disciplines. They will learn what to expect when they visit the museum.

MATERIALS:

- Two overhead transparencies, provided with this packet
- Overhead projector
- Music CD provided with this packet
- CD player
- Viewfinder (2 L-shaped pieces of cardboard, approximately 9 x 12)
- Sketch paper
- Pencils
- Black markers
- Coloring media such as water based markers, watercolors, paint brushes, or colored pencils
- Large drawing paper or canvas

FEATURED ARTISTS:

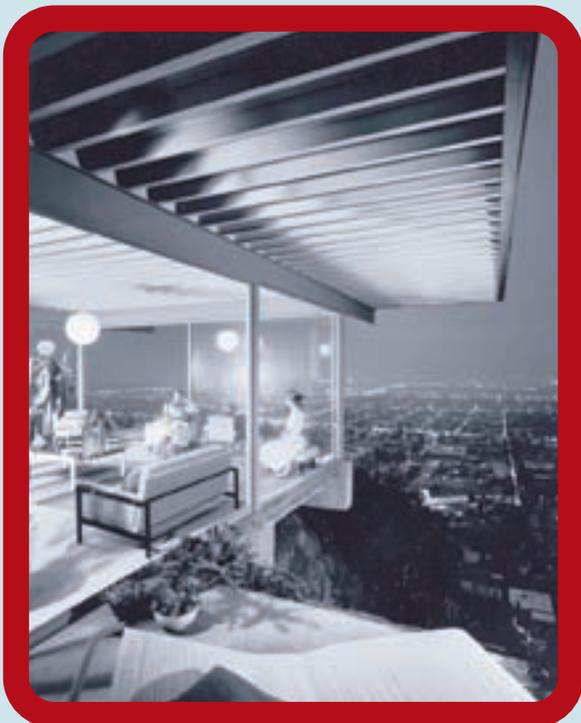


PAINTING:

Karl Benjamin,
Small Planes:
White, Blue and Pink, 1957

MUSIC:

Miles Davis,
Birth of the Cool
album cover, 1949-50



ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHY:

Julius Shulman, photograph of
Case Study House #22
(Pierre Koenig, Los Angeles,
1959-1960), 1960

REVIEW:

You may feel it is necessary to review the **elements and principles of art** with students. Knowing the definitions of these terms will help students describe the similarities they notice between music, architecture, and painting presented in these pre-visit activities. While you may more briefly review the elements of art with students (line, shape, form, space, color, value, texture), you may choose to spend more time reviewing the more complex principles of art:

- **Balance:** A way of combining elements to add a feeling of equilibrium or stability to a work of art. Balance can be of three kinds: symmetrical, asymmetrical, or radial.
- **Contrast:** Setting elements side by side emphasize their differences.
- **Dominance:** The emphasis of one aspect over all other aspects of a design.
- **Emphasis:** Special stress given to an element to make it stand out.
- **Harmony:** a way of combining similar elements in an artwork to accent their similarities.
- **Movement:** Creates the look and feeling of action and guides the viewer's eye throughout the work of art.
- **Proportion:** The relationship of certain elements to the whole and to each other.
- **Repetition:** Reversal of the order of movements or movement phrases within the choreography.
- **Rhythm:** Created by the careful placement of repeated elements in a work of art to cause a visual or auditory tempo or beat.
- **Subordination:** Making an element appear to hold secondary or lesser importance within a design or work of art.
- **Unity:** The total effect of a work of art.
- **Variety:** A way of combining elements in involved ways to create intricate and complicated relationships.

Artists employ the elements and principals of art for a variety of different effects. Later, students will create their own compositions utilizing the elements and principles of art.



DISCUSS:

Tell students they will visit the Orange County Museum of Art to view the *Birth of the Cool: California Art, Design, and Culture at Midcentury* exhibition, a show exploring 1950s culture. Ask students what is considered **cool** today. How would you define the term cool? Write student responses on the board. Think of literal definitions as well as slang definitions. Is cool easy to define? Why or why not?

The original meaning of the term cool is “neither very warm nor very cold; moderately cold”, but after World War II, it became slang for “excellent”, “hip”, or “sophisticated”. This new meaning was popularized by jazz musicians and beatniks in the 1950s. Cool is one of the few slang words that has been adopted by younger generations, unlike “keen” or “groovy”. Why does “cool” continue to stay cool?

What do you think cool meant in the 1950s? Tell students that the term cool, as used in the title of this exhibition, refers to a common **aesthetic**, or style, evident in 1950s **modern** art, architecture, film, design, music, and **popular culture**. While cool can have many connotations, it is often described as effortless style, mellow emotions, or simple elegance. The mellow, smooth sound of West Coast jazz, was labeled “cool” by critics, in contrast to the more frenetic tempo of **bebop**, a style of jazz dominating the east coast at the same time. Similarly, the Los Angeles “cool school” of **hard-edge painting**, abstract art with defined shapes and structured compositions, contrasts with the emotive, gestural style of the New York **abstract expressionists** of the same decade. California architecture and furniture design embraced clean lines and refined forms that emphasized the object’s function by removing overly complex details. The exhibition *Birth of the Cool* explores the relationships between the distinctive look and style of modernist forms of art, architecture, film, design, and music as they evolved and peaked in Southern California in the 1950s.

When we visit the museum, we will see paintings, photographs, architectural models, album covers, furniture, and a whole host of other cultural objects that defined the 1950s in California. We are going to listen to and look at the work of three of these artists, Miles Davis, Karl Benjamin, and Julius Shulman, as examples of what we might see when we visit the museum. When we visit, please remember not to touch the works of art on view, as much of it is very fragile, and all of it is irreplaceable.

LISTEN:

Tell students that the title of this exhibition comes from Miles Davis' seminal album of the same name, *Birth of the Cool*. With its overlapping of harmonies and rhythms, jazz is a modern form of music, and its particular fusion of African origins and contemporary sound make it quintessentially American. A trumpeter, bandleader and composer, Davis is widely considered to be one of the most influential musicians of the 20th century. His album, *Birth of the Cool* was first recorded in 1949–50 with collaborator Gil Evans, and features complex arrangements inspired by classical music. It defined “cool” for a national and global audience.



Distribute colored pencils and sketch paper. Tell students to sketch lines, shapes and colors as they listen to a track from *Birth of the Cool*.

Play Miles Davis' *Venus De Milo*.

After students have listened to the song, ask them why they think this music was labeled “cool”. What is the mood or feeling you get while listening to this track? How would they describe the rhythm? They may identify the mellow sound or smooth rhythm of this track. Discuss student drawings. Are the lines horizontal or vertical, smooth or jagged? Are shapes repeated? Did they hear any sounds repeated in the music? Can any of the principles of art be used to describe this sound? Did they hear contrast in the different instruments? Harmony in the combination of sounds?

The advent of **cool jazz** coincided with the introduction of the 33 1/3 RPM record, which could hold up to thirty minutes of continuous music on each side, compared with the three minutes or so per side that had been standard for decades. What possible effect could this innovation have had on listeners? Since listeners no longer had to get up to change the record every three minutes, it may have allowed them to sit back and relax, or play music in the background as they did other things.

Visual art was inspired by the popular culture of the 1950s. The California artist Karl Benjamin has said that he listened to his Miles Davis *Birth of the Cool* album so many times, he almost wore it out! In much the same way that cool jazz launched a reaction to the predominant bebop musical style of the time, the more restrained tone of the hard-edge painters offered an alternative to the dominant artistic style of the time: abstract expressionism.

LOOK AT A PAINTING:



Project Karl Benjamin's *Small Planes: White, Blue and Pink* provided in this Pre-Visit Packet. Ask students to describe what they see. How would you describe the colors? Are warm colors or cool colors dominant? Are the shapes geometric or organic? How would you describe the lines? Do they look like they were drawn with a ruler or freestyle? Do you see any repeated elements? Describe them. Do these elements correspond with the shapes, lines and colors that you envisioned while listening to Miles Davis? Are they similar? Different? Does this painting convey rhythm or movement? Harmony? Do the shapes remind you of anything?

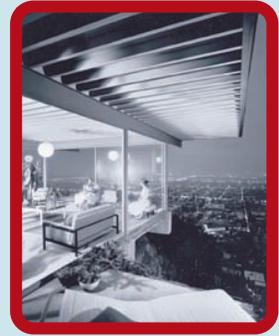
Why do you think this style is called **hard-edge painting**? Students may identify the crisp hard edges of the lines and shapes in this work. The term was coined by *Los Angeles Times* critic Jules Langer, who also curated an exhibition entitled *California Hard-Edge Painting* in 1964 at the Orange County Museum of Art (then called the Newport Pavilion). This exhibition featured work by Karl Benjamin as well as many other artists in the current show including Frederick Hammersley, Helen Lundeborg, John McLaughlin, and Lorser Feitelson.

This style of painting has also been called abstract classicist. **Abstract classicism** is a movement in art, particular to the West coast, which consisted of structured compositions, play between opaque and transparent shapes, an ambiguity between flatness and depth, and smooth, refined surfaces. Compare this with what you know about **abstract expressionism**, championed by artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning. How does their attempt to convey emotion on canvas, splattering and smearing paint in dynamic ways, differ from what you see in Benjamin's work?

Whereas abstract expressionism's hallmark is spontaneity, abstract classicism depicts careful compositional planning. With this in mind, what emotions do you associate with Benjamin's painting? With a Pollock or de Kooning? Which style of painting would you characterize as hot? Cool? Critics have described the clean, refined style of painting that emerged out of Southern California in the 1950s as the "Los Angeles Cool School" in contrast to the "New York School" of abstract expressionism from the same period.

Architects of the time were inspired by hard-edge painters like Benjamin, who painted planes of color with varying sharp angles that changed depending on one's perspective. Architects like Pierre Koenig designed light-filled modernist houses open to the natural elements, with walls and ceilings seeming more like planes floating in space than enclosures. Photographers, especially Julius Shulman, photographed such houses, framing them in such a way as to enhance their coolness.

LOOK AT AN ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPH:



Project Julius Shulman’s photograph of *Case Study House #22*, provided in this Pre-Visit Packet.

This Los Angeles house was built by Pierre Koenig during 1959-1960, and was known as a “Case Study” house. The “Case Study” program initiated thirty-six building designs—experiments in low-cost modern residential architecture to be easily replicable for the average American family. Twenty-four were actually built, and this is the twenty-second. Shulman’s images of midcentury modernist architecture have been one of the most critical factors in today’s revival of interest in this period. The photos have also allowed restorers to be as accurate as possible in reviving “Case Study” houses.

Ask students to describe the scene in the photograph. Who are the people in this photograph? What activity are they engaged in? What do they appear to be saying to each other? Ask students to describe the architecture. How would you describe the shapes and lines? Do you see any similarities between the elements in this photograph and those used in Benjamin’s paintings? What are they?

While most architectural photographers prefer to shoot empty buildings, Shulman believes that including people makes the images more interesting. He meticulously prepared the interiors of the houses he shot, hiring models and arranging furniture to create the most effective composition. Why would he choose to go through such elaborate efforts to take a photograph of a house?

Shulman was also very specific about the type of furniture he used in his photographic compositions. Ask students to describe the furniture in the photograph. Do you see any relationships between the architecture and the furniture in the photograph?

Shulman selected furniture designs created by Charles and Ray Eames, a husband-and-wife team who were the most influential modernist designers of the 1940s and 1950s. The Eameses designed furniture that embodied the principles of modernism in design and were also accessible and affordable. In the 1950s their innovative furniture designs, introduced in California, could be found in department stores and magazine advertisements nationwide. Many of their designs are on display in the *Birth of the Cool* exhibition.

Would you characterize the scene as “cool,” according to the characteristic we have discussed? Why or why not? The modernist architecture and designs created by individuals like Koenig and the Eames were popularized by photographers such as Julius Shulman. To many Americans, these images embodied the myth of the California dream, and motivated many to move to the west coast in search of domestic bliss and a relaxed, cool lifestyle.

Ask students to reflect on the three artworks you experienced.

- What connections did you see between music, painting, photography and architecture from the 1950s?
- What differences did you see?
- Consider the music, painting, and architecture of today. Do you see any parallels in cultural production in the early twenty-first century? Differences?

CREATE:

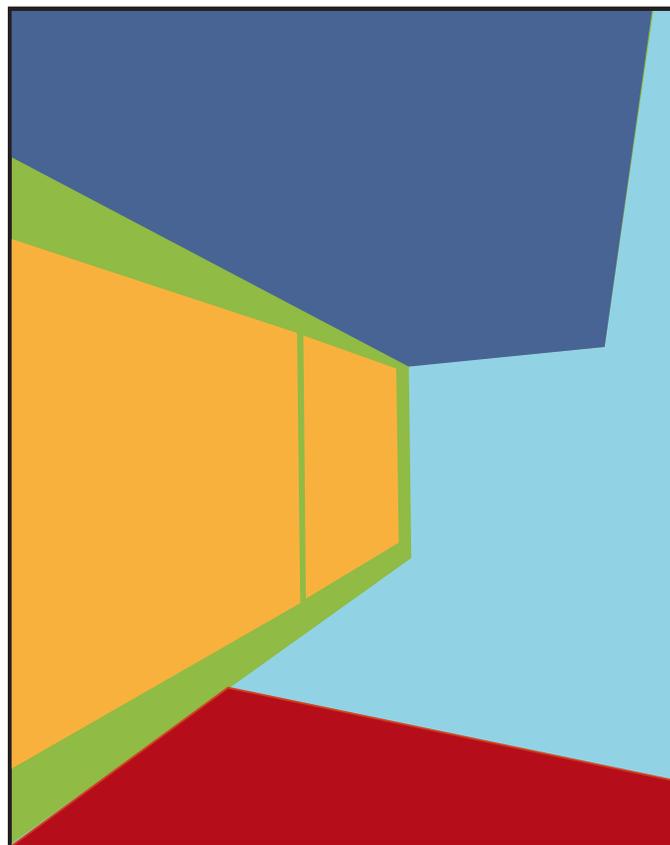
Some hard-edge paintings of the 1950s appear similar to the geometric angles of modern architecture of the same era. Using a simple cardboard viewfinder, have students isolate a fragment of a building that could become an abstract painting. Encourage students to think about the principles of art while planning their compositions: emphasis, harmony, rhythm, movement, variety, proportion, unity, and balance. Ultimately, this abstracted architectural feature should result in a composition that addresses these principles.

1. Pair students.
2. Ask each group to select a favorite building on campus or in their neighborhood.
3. Using the viewfinder, have students travel around the building and frame a composition. The composition should include visually interesting angles of a building, with some detailed and some ambiguous areas. Using a 9 x 12 piece of drawing paper, have students sketch the composition framed by your viewfinder. Have them ask their partner to hold the viewfinder for 3 minutes while they sketch.
4. Reverse so that the partner sketches while the other student holds their viewfinder.

5. Go back to the classroom to finalize compositions. As students work on their compositions, they should address the elements of art:
- a. Value: Using a black marker, create darks. Fill in areas with cross hatching, stippling, or solid color.
 - b. Line: Sections can be outlined and/or lines can be enhanced with thin to thick weighted lines.
 - c. Color: Colors can be analogous (cool and warm), complementary (colors directly across from each other on the color wheel), split complementary, or monochromatic.
 - d. Shape: break each architectural element into basic shapes.
 - e. Texture: Create visual texture with cross hatching or stippling.
 - f. Space: Leave light areas to create space.

Display student work. Discuss how each student has used the elements and principals of art. Does the work resemble hard-edge painting? How? Would this work be considered “cool” or “hot”?

EXAMPLE:

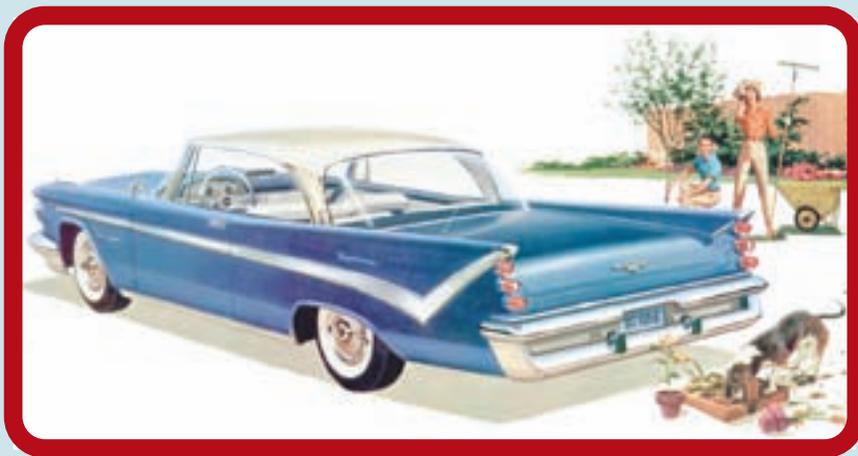


WRITE:

Like trends, the meaning of cool has changed over time. What was considered cool or hip in the 1950s may no longer be popular today. Ask students to choose a commodity that they feel enthusiastic about such as cars, clothes, music, or furniture. Tell students to research this commodity as it was designed in the 1950s and compare it to how it is designed today. You may direct student research to newspaper articles; magazines; web resources; and photographs. Ask them to research the answers to the following questions:

1. What was cool for this commodity in the 1950s?
2. What is cool for this commodity today?
3. What will be the future for this commodity?

Have students write a research paper, complete with bibliography, that states their position on the future of their chosen commodity, based on their research.



1950s automobile advertisement

2007 automobile advertisement



VOCABULARY:

Abstract classicism:

A movement in abstract painting of the 1950s, particular to the West coast, which featured structured compositions, play between opaque and transparent shapes, an ambiguity between flatness and depth, and smooth, refined surfaces. This style is also known as hard-edge painting.

Aesthetic:

Of or concerning the appreciation of beauty or good taste. Used more loosely, aesthetic can be another way of saying, “look” or “style”: “The 1950s was characterized by the cool aesthetic.”

Bebop:

A form of jazz music that features fast tempos and spontaneous creative outbursts, or improvisations.

Cool:

The original meaning of the term cool is “neither very warm nor very cold; moderately cold,” but after World War II, it became slang for “excellent,” “hip,” or “sophisticated.” While cool can have many connotations, it is often described as effortless style, mellow emotions, or simple elegance.

Cool jazz:

A jazz style that emerged in the late 1940s and became strongly identified with the West Coast jazz scene. It features complex arrangements and mellow rhythms.

Elements of art:

Sensory components used to create works of art: line, color, shape or form, texture, value and space.

Hard-edge painting:

A movement in abstract painting of the 1950s, which featured structured compositions, play between opaque and transparent shapes, an ambiguity between flatness and depth, and smooth, refined surfaces. This style is often called abstract classicism.

Modern:

A genre of the fine arts created from the mid-19th century to approximately 1964, which strayed from traditional techniques and styles of the centuries preceding it. Birth of the Cool focuses on midcentury modernism. Modern can also mean the present.

Popular culture:

Generally accepted cultural patterns that are widespread within a population. Also called pop culture, popular culture consists of contemporary lifestyle and items that are well known.

Principles of art:

The organization of works of art involving the ways in which the elements of art are arranged (e.g. balance, emphasis, movement, rhythm)



WHO IS MILES DAVIS?

Miles Davis, was born in 1926 and became one of the most influential American jazz musicians of the 20th century. A trumpeter, bandleader and composer, Davis was a leader in almost every major development in jazz from World War II to the 1990s. He recorded one of the first cool jazz records. *Birth of the Cool* is an album which collects twelve songs recorded by the Miles Davis nonet (nine musicians) in 1949 and 1950.



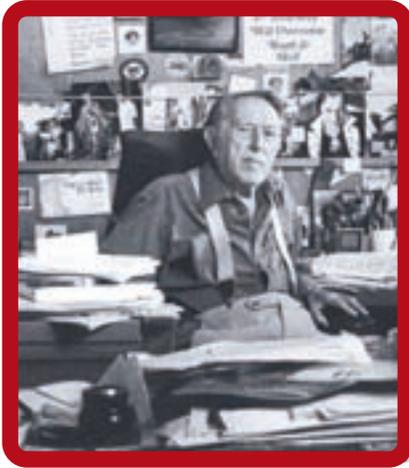
WHO IS KARL BENJAMIN?

Supporting his young family as a schoolteacher, Karl Benjamin began painting in the early 1950s. In 1952 Benjamin moved to Claremont, California, a college town east of Los Angeles with an active art scene. In the 1980s and 1990s Benjamin taught art at the Claremont Graduate School, where he influenced a generation of California artists. He has said that he listened to his Miles Davis *Birth of the Cool* album so many times he almost wore it out!



WHO IS PIERRE KOENIG?

Pierre Koenig is one of the twentieth century's most influential architects, especially in southern California. Born in San Francisco, California in 1925, Koenig practiced architecture mainly on the West Coast. He believed that the natural states of materials, such as steel and glass, should be used in buildings without changing them or adding unnecessary details. He also believed that houses should use minimal energy and not cost a lot to maintain. He used passive cooling and solar heating techniques to create energy efficient buildings. He was best known for the design of the Case Study Houses No. 21 and 22 in 1960 and other steel houses. Both 21 (the Bailey House) and 22 (the Stahl House) were constructed on dramatic sites, such as steep Los Angeles hillsides.



WHO IS JULIUS SHULMAN?

Julius Shulman was born October 10, 1910 and is an American architectural photographer best known for his photograph *Case Study House #22* seen in *Birth of the Cool*. Shulman enrolled in a high school photography class as an eleventh-grade student at Roosevelt High School in Los Angeles. Otherwise self-taught, he became an avid amateur photographer, rarely going anywhere without his Kodak camera. Shulman's photography spread California modernism around the world. Through his many books, exhibits and personal appearances his work ushered in a new appreciation for the movement beginning in the 1990s.



WHO ARE CHARLES AND RAY EAMES?

Charles Eames was born in 1907 in Saint Louis, Missouri. While he was in high school, Charles worked part time at a steel company where he learned about engineering, drawing, and architecture. This was when he first thought he would become an architect. Ray Kaiser Eames was born in Sacramento, California in the 1910s. She studied painting and design at the Cranbrook Academy in Michigan, where she met Charles. They married in 1941. The Eameses designed furniture with simple, smooth shapes that was accessible and affordable. In the 1950s their innovative furniture designs, introduced in California, could be found in department stores and magazine advertisements nationwide. People loved the simple, sloping shapes of the Eames' designs, and still do to this day.



Karl Benjamin, *Small Planes: White, Blue and Pink*, 1957, oil on linen, 36 x 48 in. (91.4 x 121.9 cm), The Buck Collection, Laguna Beach, California . © Karl Benjamin



Julius Shulman, *photograph of Case Study House #22 (Pierre Koenig, architect, Los Angeles, 1959–60)*, 1960. © J. Paul Getty Trust. Used with permission. Julius Shulman Photography Archive, Research Library at the Getty Research Institute