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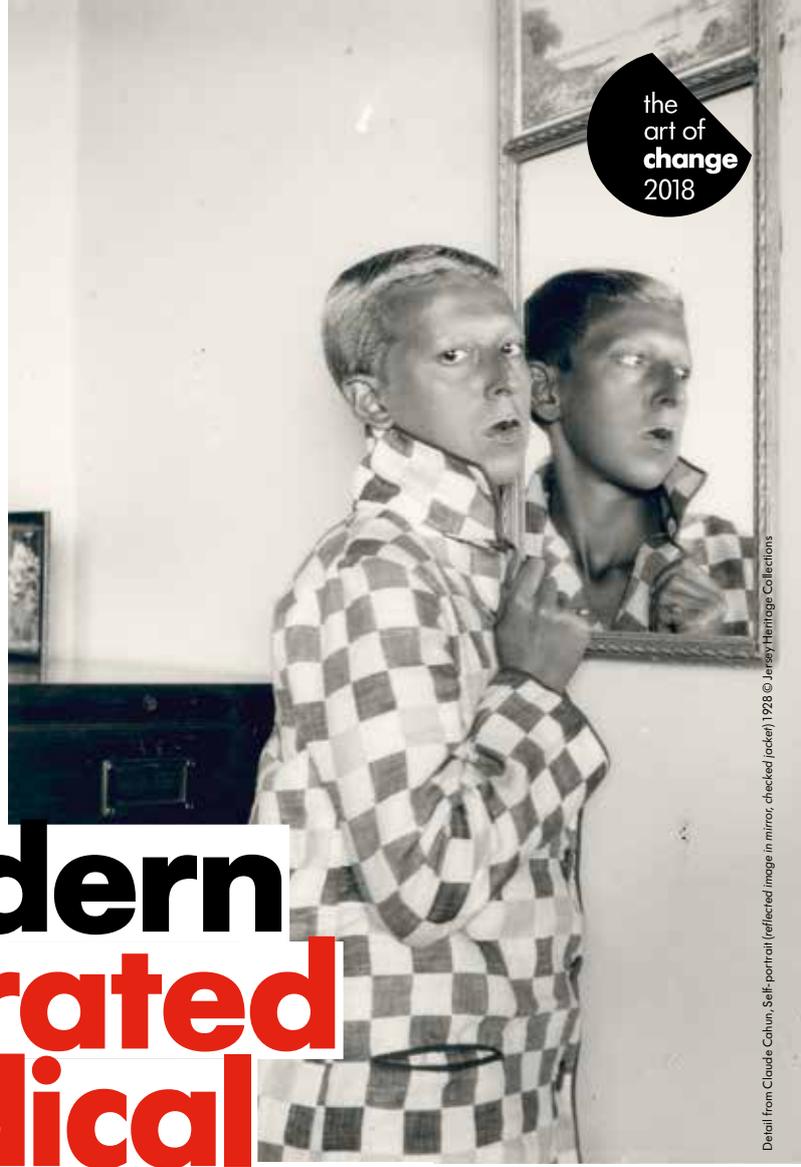
**Creative Learning  
Teacher Resource**

**Modern Couples**

Art, Intimacy and  
the Avant-garde

the  
art of  
change  
2018

**Modern  
Liberated  
Radical  
Obsessional  
Couples**



Detail from Claude Cahun, Self-portrait (reflected image in mirror, checked jacket) 1928 © Jersey Heritage Collections



Detail from Claude Cahun, Suzanne Malherbe/Marcel Moore 1928 © Jersey Heritage Collections

**GUILD  
HALL  
SCHOOL**

## Modern Couples: Art, Intimacy and the Avant-garde

This exhibition showcases the creative output of over 40 artist couples active in the first half of the 20th century – featuring the work of painters, sculptors, photographers, architects, designers, writers, musicians and performers, alongside personal photographs, letters, gifts and archival material.

This exhibition is part of *The Art of Change* season, highlighting how artists respond to, reflect and potentially effect change in the social and political landscape.

### Using this Resource

This resource is designed to provide context for the exhibition through a range of potential focus areas, curriculum links, spotlights on artists, key questions to encourage engagement, ideas and activities to try and areas for further research beyond the gallery. It may be useful to school teachers or leaders of arts or youth groups visiting the exhibition.

You can draw from it to open up discussion and responses from your groups – encouraging them to explore their own preferences, thoughts, ideas, observations and interpretations about the works. Students may use pencil to make notes and drawn responses to the exhibition.

Please be advised that there is some content in the exhibition which is explicit (content suitable for those over 16 or 18) and these areas are clearly labelled as such. If your groups are under this age avoiding these small areas won't impact on their interaction with the exhibition as a whole.

Resource created by Alison Dunne for Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning.

The exhibition *Modern Couples: Art, Intimacy and the Avant-garde* at the Barbican Art Gallery, London is curated by Jane Alison, Emma Lavigne, Elia Biezunski and Cloé Pitiot.

This resource draws largely on the exhibition catalogue and texts written by Jane Alison and Coralie Malissard.

### Plan your Visit

Barbican Art Gallery (Level 3), Barbican Centre

10 October 2018 – 27 January 2019

Sat–Wed, 10am–6pm

Thu–Fri, 10am–10pm

A discounted group booking rate of £3 per student applies to all secondary and sixth form school groups of ten or more (up to age 19).

For bookings and enquiries please contact the school groups booking line. Tel: 020 7382 7211 (Mon–Fri 10am–5pm) Email: [groups@barbican.org.uk](mailto:groups@barbican.org.uk)

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**Spotlight on Artists** – use the works of specific artist couples/groups to guide your visit and follow up activities. Each artist section includes related information, key questions, suggested creative activities and areas to explore further.

### Up Close

Modern Couples is an exhibition focusing on intimate relationships in all their forms – obsessional, conventional, mythic, platonic, fleeting, life-long, heterosexual, homosexual, bi-sexual, non-binary and gender fluid. The exhibition also explores and reveals the way in which creative individuals came together – transgressing the constraints of their time, reshaping art, redefining gender stereotypes and identities, collaborating in exciting ways and forging news ways of living and loving. Importantly, the exhibition also challenges the idea that the history of art was mainly composed of solo, predominantly male geniuses – and gives due recognition to the women in artist duos who were often omitted from the history books and unjustly marginalised.

Modern Couples offers a deeply personal and revealing insight into the transformative impact artists had on each other through their varied relationships, from creative experimentation, the development of radical ideas, the emergence of new forms of artistic expression and new ways of being in the world. These relationships were capable of dissolving, blending or transforming individual identities and were a demonstration of the incredible things that happen when we allow ourselves the space to really share and collaborate – an unlocking of new energies and creative riches.

Numerous themes or areas of key focus can be explored across the exhibition. These are highlighted in this section and explored further in the Spotlight on Artists section (including questions and activities) that follows.

#### Modernism and the Avant-Garde – Innovation, experimentation and pushing boundaries...

The exhibition shows the lives and works of artists very much embedded in Modernism and the Avant-Garde. From the late 19th Century, huge shifts occurred in technology, industrialisation, society, culture and the arts – Modernism was born. The work in this exhibition reflects the change and possibilities inherent in Modernism – new experiences and values were explored alongside innovative approaches to creating art. This was a time to explore and experiment and move away from the constraints of tradition and history.

Avant-garde (meaning advance guard, the part of an army that goes forward ahead of the rest) – originally described the artists and writers of the late 19th and early 20th century who were trail blazers, visionaries, boundary pushers and innovators in their fields, radically challenging old ideas and ways of working.

Explore the world of Modernism and the Avant-Garde. Also think about artists and individuals of today who you believe to be pushing boundaries and creating change.

#### Collaboration and inter-disciplinary working...

This exhibition demonstrates how some of the most ground-breaking artistic works resulted when artists with knowledge and experience from distant specialisms have collided and sparked new ideas, art forms and 'languages'.

Think of ways of developing your own creative processes by blurring the distinctions between genres (and curriculum areas) and trying out collaborative practice with others who have different ideas and skills. Collaboration with others across specialisms can be energising and surprising and worth stepping out of one's comfort zones for!

Collaborative practice is fundamentally about entering a conversation and shaping a meaningful dialogue – exchanging and sharing points of view, inspiring one another with fresh ideas, switching frames of reference and challenging one another's preconceptions.

Art produced within the context of a relationship can be seen as a form of giving birth, and equally, artistic partnerships allow artists to reciprocally give birth to each other as artists. 'I am the work of your life', Claude Cahun said to Marcel Moore.

What inter-disciplinary or multi-disciplinary ways of working can you think of? Think about how you can sample and take inspiration from different areas and disciplines. Move out of your comfort zone for inspiration e.g. music, science, dance, writing, technology etc.

Key words and phrases to think about in relation to this way of working:

collaboration, inter-disciplinary, team, collective, cooperate, inspire, hybrid, shared ownership, reflection, influence, cross-fertilisation, challenge, dialogue, partnership, exchange, conversation, respect for others' ideas and processes, mutual encouragement.

#### Art as a gift or an exchange of ideas and inspiration

Modern Couples reveals how often art, whether literature, poetry or object, can be a gift to a loved one. Sometimes that gift is a personal token or keepsake; sometimes a homage made public for the world to see. The examples range widely: Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, a tribute to her lover Vita Sackville-West; Leonora Carrington's Portrait of Max Ernst, which she gave to

him when she met him in New York before beginning a new life with a new husband in Mexico; Salvador Dalí's deftly executed drawings and annotated and collaged newspaper cuttings that were small enough to send to Federico Garcia Lorca in a letter, reciprocated by the poet Lorca writing his Ode to Salvador Dalí, 1926.

Photographer Alfred Stieglitz gave as his gift the promise of a lifetime's endeavour. At the outset of his relationship in 1917 with painter Georgia O'Keeffe, he sent her a box of photographs that he had taken of her, accompanied by a letter that read: 'I think I could do a thousand things of you – a life's work to express you.' This is what he proceeded to do, tenderly photographing every changing facet of his lover. O'Keeffe replied to Stieglitz: 'The box came ... and I love myself ... it makes me laugh that I love myself so much – Like myself as you make me.' Their shared vision and inspiration can be seen in the exhibition in striking paintings and photographs often of the same subject matter, individually interpreted.

When the Brazilian sculptor Maria Martins and Marcel Duchamp became lovers, Duchamp's infatuation with her led him to creating a series of art pieces known as his Erotic Objects. These were a series of sculptural objects made from imprints and casts of intimate areas of Maria's body.

Try making reciprocal art as a gift with someone else (taking into account their interests, ideas and personality as well as your own).

### Curriculum Links

#### Art and design

The exhibition explores a huge range of artists' and artist couples' works, emphasising their influences, inspirations and collaborations.

#### Ask

- How have the artist couples and groups influenced, inspired and enriched each other and their artistic work? How do you think their work would have developed without these key relationships in their lives?

- Think about ways you could work in creative collaboration and partnership with others.

- Surrealism as a movement features particularly strongly within the exhibition – look at examples of work by these young artists who proposed a new world order (motivated by the horrors of the First World War) in which uninhibited love, art and poetry could fight oppression, propaganda and conservatism.

After your visit you may wish to research the wider context of the artists' work that you find interesting. You may wish to look at the work of artists in the Spotlight on Artists section or other examples including the following (but there are many more you may discover on your journey around the exhibition):

- Moholy and László Moholy-Nagy and other artists, makers and architects of the Bauhaus
- Vladimir Mayakovsky, Lilya and Osip Brik and the social context that followed the Russian revolution
- Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov and the Rayism (form of abstraction) movements
- Varvara Stepanova and Alexander Rodchenko and Constructionism



Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, *Fotogramm: Double Portrait*, (Laszlo and Lucia), 1922-6. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

### Photography

Examine how photography has been used to document people's stories and communicate ideas, themes and relationships.

#### Ask

- What impact do these images have on you?
- How do the photographers' relationships with their subjects and different styles impact the way the image is read?

In the exhibition, photography is brought to life through the collaborations of legendary figures including:

- Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore;
- Lucia Moholy and László Moholy-Nagy's photographic portrayal of the Bauhaus;
- Lee Miller and Man Ray's shared experiments in the darkroom
- Edward Weston's inspirational relationships with both Margrethe Mather and Tina Modotti;
- Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann's masterful use of the photomontage as a political tool

### History

The tragic events of the First World War from 1914 to 1918 – including immense loss of life – had a tremendous impact on the social, political and artistic movements that emerged in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Women were suddenly unshackled from automatic domesticity and the constraints of marriage, and many traditional certainties vanished. For many of the artists in this exhibition, their relationships offered a space of freedom and a retreat from the social upheavals and shifting identities brought about by the First World War and its aftermath. Modern Couples charts the pursuit of personal freedom and artistic innovation in the first half of the twentieth century, hard won for those who dared to go against the grain.

#### Consider

- How the early twentieth century saw the coming of age of the 'queer citizen,' the battle for acceptance of same-sex relationships and women's liberation and demands for equality.
- How innovative artists, scientists and other creatives fled the rise of Nazism, and found sanctuary and inspiration elsewhere: for example, in the artistic and creative community spirit of Hampstead, London (where Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson lived and worked) or on Jersey where Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore retreated from Paris.

### English literature

Literature plays a strong role in Modern Couples. Within the exhibition, there is a focus on the leading Modernist writer Virginia Woolf and her landmark text *Orlando: A Biography*, a celebration of her transformative relationship with Vita Sackville-West. Woolf's rarely seen, original manuscript is on display. Also displayed are a selection of 35 first edition books published with her husband Leonard Woolf under the Hogarth Press.

At the same time as *Orlando* was published, Natalie Clifford Barney (playwright, poet and novelist) was holding evening salons in Paris, principally for women attracted to women. Coined The Temple de l'Amitie (The Temple of Friendship), it became a space for female desire and artistic innovation, bringing together a range of writers, artists and poets. The exhibition has a section dedicated to the Temple and its wider community of lesbian and bisexual artists and writers.

The exhibition also includes an array of beautifully crafted books of love poems that came out of iconic Surrealist relationships and collaborations.

#### Consider

- The importance of visual art and literary forms and how they might overlap, reinforce or heighten each other's meaning. Look at how artists and writers began working in a new medium when influenced by a partner – for example, a visual artist turned poet/writer.
- How words and images interplay to create different levels of meaning, including how image and text are used within the exhibition.
- How images communicate ideas, tell stories and inspire creativity in the viewer.

Students may use works in the exhibition as starting points for free writing, which can be further developed into narratives or short stories.

## Spotlight on Artists

### Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf

The circle of artists and intellectuals known as the Bloomsbury Group included writer Virginia Woolf, Virginia's sister, Vanessa Bell, Clive Bell, Leonard Woolf, Duncan Grant, Roger Fry and E.M Forster. They were united by their belief in the importance of the arts – the pursuit of knowledge, intellectual debate, learning, creating and appreciating the arts in all their forms. They also challenged convention and believed in pleasure – with sexual freedom, open relationships, love triangles and affairs being both accepted and celebrated. These relationships (including the marriage of Virginia and Leonard Woolf) were alike in the freedom they allowed each other and the trust they required.

#### Can you see some of the creative results of this extraordinary cross-fertilisation of ideas in the rich interplay between artistic disciplines?

Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography* was inspired by her relationship with writer Vita Sackville-West and is a celebration of the bond between women and same sex attraction. Nigel Nicolson, Sackville-West's son, wrote, 'The effect of Vita on Virginia is all contained in *Orlando*, the longest and most charming love letter in literature, in which she explores Vita, weaves her in and out of the centuries, tosses her from one sex to the other, plays with her, dresses her in furs, lace and emeralds, teases her, flirts with her, drops a veil of mist around her.' Woolf told Sackville-West that with *Orlando* she would 'revolutionise biography in a night'.

#### Consider how though Virginia and Vita had a relatively fleeting liaison (1923–28), it was 'reciprocal and profound' resulting in a landmark of 20th century queer literature.



Anonymous, *Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West*, 1933. Houghton Library, Harvard University.

### Vanessa Bell, Clive Bell and Roger Fry

Vanessa Bell had three significant romantic relationships in her life, all with men who encouraged her career as an artist.

Vanessa Stephen married artist Clive Bell in 1907. By this time, she was an accomplished and ambitious young painter. Their marriage was initially very happy with mutual encouragement and shared interests. Vanessa and Clive both admired the painter and art writer, Roger Fry. By 1911 Roger Fry and Vanessa were in an intimate relationship grounded in a shared love of painting and art. Her ability to sustain productive relationships with the men in her life was exemplified in 1912 when Clive Bell and Roger Fry worked together to curate and promote the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition. This exhibition introduced Modernist art to London and coined the term Post-Impressionist to describe the art from Gauguin, Van Gogh and Cézanne to early Matisse and Picasso. It also propelled the Bloomsbury Group into the public eye, with works by British Modernists and Bloomsbury Group members Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant.

*I believe you have an extraordinary effect on other people's work. I always feel it when I'm with you ... What is it you have in you Roger? ... I don't know how you do it but you make everything bigger and more alive.*

Vanessa Bell to Roger Fry, 16 August 1911

### The Omega Workshops

In 1913, Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry and Duncan Grant co-founded the Omega Workshops to promote Modernist art and design, particularly for home interiors with products including ceramics, murals and textiles. Designs were inspired by such varied subjects as dance movements, still life compositions and modern art, including the bold forms and colours of post-Impressionist, Cubist and Fauvist artworks. Can you see the overlaps between fine art and design in some of Omega's products?

Bell and Grant's artistic collaboration grew increasingly close, but she was far from alone in her admiration of him. Grant had been lovers with a number of men in Bell's circle, including the influential economist John Maynard Keynes.

Bell and Grant's most striking collaboration was their home, Charleston farmhouse in East Sussex, which is now open to the public as a house-museum. Gradually, their artistic output embraced the house from floor to ceiling, creating a powerful work of 'total' art. Exuberant decoration spread and flowed across all surfaces including doors, tables and walls, with a hand-made aesthetic characterising the group's unique mix of ingredients. Consider how their way of living was an unparalleled experiment in alternative 'family' living and love that flouted English social convention.

Charleston became a home for the Bloomsbury group to meet and create. Roger Fry designed a studio addition, Clive Bell was a regular visitor and John Maynard Keynes wrote some of his most important work while staying at the house. In 1918 Grant fathered a daughter, Angelica, with Vanessa. At a time when homosexuality and extra-marital sex risked social ostracism and prosecution Clive Bell claimed paternity.

#### Try

Try making a work of 'total' art in the spirit of the Omega Workshop either yourself or in collaboration with others – e.g. spread your creativity over designing and decorating furniture, textiles/clothing, murals, ceramics etc. Use a variety of starting points for inspiration e.g. the work of artists you admire, or try creating visual equivalents for dance movements and music you enjoy.

Develop your creative writing, perhaps exploring the characteristics of someone you find inspiring (as Virginia did in *Orlando: A Biography*). This can be extended by incorporating fantastical elements e.g. time travel.

#### Ask

To what extent did the success of the artists, writers and thinkers of the Bloomsbury Group depend on the influence and inspiration from others in the group? How far do you think they would have developed individually in their art forms without such relationships? Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf believed that artistic practice would enable them to find true personal freedom and equality – do you believe they achieved this?

#### Explore Further:

Further figures from the Bloomsbury group, e.g. E.M Forster

Omega Workshops

Charleston Farmhouse - <https://www.charleston.org.uk>

*Deceived with Kindness: A Bloomsbury Childhood*, the biography of Angelica Garnett, daughter of Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant. An illuminating and fascinating insight into the lives of the Bloomsbury group from her perspective.

### Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera

Legendary couple Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera's well-documented relationship was notoriously tumultuous and emotionally charged.

Diego Rivera's art was focused on illustrating and reflecting on Mexican history and the people's struggles in large-scale mural commissions. Frida Kahlo, by contrast, highlighted her Mexican identity by wearing lavish, traditional costumes, hairstyles and jewellery and creating smaller-scale, deeply personal works. Notice how Kahlo's works often depicted her dreams, her pain, her feminism and her volatile love affair with Rivera. She often used the style of Catholic ex-voto or votive paintings which became very popular in 19<sup>th</sup> century Mexico: small paintings (often on tin or wood) which were created as an offering to Jesus, Mary or a saint to give thanks for a miracle or an answered prayer.

Despite their different approaches to art, Rivera and Kahlo were both engaged in the rebirth of their country (including the Mexican Revolution), became active members of the Mexican Communist Party and both wanted to create a 'popular art'.

Between them, a ball of inspiration bounced back and forth, from one point of view to the other, from one intellect to another. Even after Rivera had an affair with her sister, Frida continued to hold Rivera at the forefront of her thoughts – for example, consider how she painted him sitting in the centre of her forehead in her self-portraits to symbolise his importance to her.

Kahlo's powerful and rarely seen painting *The Wounded Deer* (1946) alludes both to the physical trauma she endured following an unsuccessful operation and to the fragility of her relationship with Rivera as well as more broadly encapsulating the pain that goes with love.

#### Try

Macro to micro. Personal and private to national or historical: Try large scale works e.g. murals and smaller more intimate pieces on the scale of votives. You may try using your own life and experiences or historical/national narratives as inspiration and subject matter – or maybe a fusion of the two. Work on different surfaces such as tin and wood (as many votives were). Or locate and get permission to use a blank wall to design and create a collaborative mural with a group.

As in Kahlo's *The Wounded Deer*, use symbolism to describe and allude to complex ideas (rather than literal illustration).

#### Ask

Frida Kahlo endured pain in many forms during her life, ranging from a tram accident as a teenager, to as many as 30 operations, including the amputation of her leg, to the emotionally painful, tempestuous relationship with Rivera. How does this pain inform and even transform her art?

Think of the overlaps and differences in the approaches Rivera and Kahlo take to their work. Would you say Rivera and Kahlo were political artists? If so, in what ways?

How does Kahlo communicate often overlooked female experiences? Would you describe Kahlo as a feminist artist?

#### Explore Further:

Frida Kahlo house <http://www.museofridakahlo.org.mx/en/the-blue-house/>

Frida Kahlo at the V&A <https://www.vam.ac.uk/exhibitions/frida-kahlo-making-her-self-up>

### Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore

Cahun wrote, 'The couple is a duplicate entity. We come out of our splendid isolation; we borrow from the wider world. My lover...shall be my collaborator...I am one half, you are the other.'

Claude Cahun (born Lucie Schwob), along with her partner in love and art (and also step-sister), Marcel Moore (born Suzanne Malherbe), were embedded in the cultural life of Paris during the interwar years. Their adoption of gender-neutral names would have been a radical act in the early 20th century. Moore regularly contributed fashion illustrations to the Schwob family newspaper, where Cahun's earliest writings also appeared.

Moore's illustrations also frame Cahun's verses of poetry in a volume titled *Vues et Visions*, published in 1919. This book made their intense artistic and romantic partnership public. The couple participated in various avant-garde experimental and theatrical ventures (Cahun performed, Moore designed sets and costumes), hosted cultural and political meetings in their studio, and became active contributors to the Surrealist movement.

Throughout the 1920s Cahun and Moore pursued a project of theatrical camera play that yielded hundreds of photographs of Cahun dressed in a variety of roles that disrupted and challenged ideas of established and narrow gender stereotypes. Consider Cahun's words, 'under this mask, another mask. I will never be finished removing all these faces'. In 1930 Moore integrated these photographs into a series of collages published as illustrations for Cahun's Surrealist autobiography.

At the approach of the Second World War, Cahun and Moore moved to the island of Jersey. They were not safe for long as the Channel Islands were soon occupied by German forces. Their resistance activities, including distribution of anti-fascist tracts, led to their imprisonment in 1944 with the German military requisitioning their house as a base. Soldiers rifled through their possessions, appropriating or destroying artworks they considered perverted. The couple very narrowly escaped deportation and were released when the island was liberated on 8 May 1945.

#### Try

Creating a range of self-portraits (or portraits of someone you know) in any media, exploring different aspects of self and identity, and the 'masks' we wear in life. Try challenging your own and others' expectations and perceptions in what you present!

Crossing disciplines such as drama, art and writing. Consider putting on a collaborative theatre/performance piece with sets and costume designs.

#### Ask

What are the 'masks' we wear in life – and for what purposes? Consider our layers of identity – e.g. nationality, gender, style, roles. How does dress add to the creation of an identity?

How far have we come since the earlier years of the 20th century in moving beyond gender stereotyping? Consider changing attitudes to gender-fluid identities and relationships over time.

#### Explore further

Explore the context of Cahun and Moore's work including the wider Surrealist movement. In relation to the couple's work, look at the more contemporary work of Cindy Sherman and Gillian Wearing which also explores layers of identity.

<https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/wearing-cahun/home/>



Claude Cahun, *Image of photomontage illustration from 'Aveux non Avenus' [Disavowed Confessions]*, 1930. Courtesy of the Jersey Heritage Collections.

## Sonia and Robert Delaunay

From the moment they met in 1907, Robert and Sonia Delaunay formed an inseparable artistic couple. Lovers but also artistic collaborators, the Delaunays experimented with abstract styles such as Fauvism, Surrealism and Cubism before developing their own unique aesthetic. Characterised by strong colours and geometric shapes, their style first became known as Orphism. This was an abstract painting style that embraced the possibilities of simultaneous colour, based on the phenomenon of colours looking different depending on the colours around them.

The Delaunays’ paintings consisted of sections of contrasting (or complementary) colours brought together. Look closely at how colours affect each other in their art works you see in the exhibition. See how the complementary colours enhance each other, giving the paintings greater intensity and vibrancy. As early as 1910, the year of their marriage, the couple set out the principles that would define their art: the need to break with conventional approaches to painting, to construct form through colour and invent a universal language of light. In doing so, they sought to create entirely abstract, autonomous paintings and a global art of Simultanism.

Working exclusively as a painter, Robert produced numerous series featuring variations on both the popular and monumental symbols of early 20th century Paris. Thanks to the play of simultaneous, contrasting colours in his paintings, architectural forms were treated like fragments shattered by light (e.g. the Tour Eiffel series, 1910-11).

Although initially drawn to the same subject matter as her partner, Sonia Delaunay’s work very quickly took a different course. She applied and extended the principle of simultaneous contrast to objects, fabrics, book covers and bindings and more. She set up her own fashion house, Maison Delaunay, where she designed colourful textiles featuring dazzling zigzags and geometrical shapes.

The couple continued to develop and extend their theories of Simultanism into further art forms such as cinema, theatre, ballet and costume design.

### Try

Try drawing or painting your subject by breaking your subject matter down in to ever simpler geometric shapes or facets (using Orphism/Simultanism or Cubism as inspiration).

Extend your experiments with colour, geometric shapes and abstraction into surface designs for e.g. printed fabric/textile designs, stage/costume designs.

### Ask

Have you tried experimenting with painting complementary colours – vibrant reds and greens, purples and yellows, oranges and blues – side by side? Experiment and see how the colours pulse and change dependent on their colour pairings and proximity to other colours – as they do in the work of the Delaunays.

### Explore further

Look at the art movements of Cubism and Fauvism which inspired the Delaunays and set them on their own journey of discovery with colour and abstraction.

## Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth

Barbara Hepworth (1903–75) and Ben Nicholson (1894–1982) lived and worked together for over a decade. At the beginning of their relationship, they were deeply engaged with each other in every aspect of their lives including their embrace and exploration of abstract art. Their relationship was at its most reciprocal during the years between 1933 and the outbreak of the Second World War – if you look carefully at their works in Modern Couples, you’ll see when Nicholson begins to carve and Hepworth begins to draw.

Hepworth’s open and closed forms reference the contours of the human body or of the landscape. Her work invites participation – to touch, look through or even climb in! She wanted to make art that was welcoming and tactile and liked her sculptures to be situated in public or natural places to encourage greater interaction.

Inspired by Cubism, Nicholson created abstract compositions of simplified geometric shapes and structures. In White Reliefs his work takes on a sculptural form of low abstract reliefs. Asked about his feeling for Hepworth, Nicholson exclaimed ‘Barbara and I are the SAME [... we] live, think and work and move and stay still together as if we were one person’. As Nazism and fascism swept Europe during the 1930s, Hepworth and Nicholson lived for each other and innovated with spectacular creativity.

### Try

In the spirit of reciprocity, try to make a drawing sculpture or sculpt a drawing/painting. Mix it up!

Using Ben Nicholson’s white reliefs as inspiration, make a sculptural painting, so that it has a more three-dimensional rather than flat surface.

Using Hepworth’s sculptures as inspiration, make a drawing sculpture. Try using tactile surfaces and mark making, in addition to focusing on form and dimensions.

### Ask

Looking at the work of Ben Nicholson, in what ways can you see the influence of his relationship with sculptor Barbara Hepworth? In Hepworth’s work do you detect the influence of a painter?

### Explore further

Explore the St Ives School of artists and ‘naïve’ painter Alfred Wallis.

<https://hepworthwakefield.org/>



Barbara Hepworth, *Conoid, Sphere and Hollow III*, 1937, Government Art Collection.

## Dora Maar and Pablo Picasso

When he met Dora Maar, Pablo Picasso had stopped painting to spend several months writing poetry, in a style similar to the automatism used by the Surrealists. Maar also wrote poems and reintroduced Picasso to the Surrealist circle. Maar’s Surrealist photography dealt with the absurd and played with the psychology and juxtaposition of subjects and spaces.

Maar was intellectually and emotionally challenging to Picasso. He represented her constantly within his work through deconstructed angular forms and bright, acidic colours. Together they studied printing with Man Ray, and experimented with new techniques combining painting and photography. In 1936 and 1937, Maar and Picasso worked together to break down the barriers between artistic disciplines. Using a blade and white paint, Picasso transposed photographic portraits of Maar onto glass plates, as the starting-point for multiple prints in the dark room.

The beginning of their affair had coincided with the declaration of civil war in Spain – consider the effect of this war on their creative outputs. The famous Weeping Woman (1937) portrait was created against the backdrop of war, loss of life and the rise of fascism, and a total of ten paintings and 25 drawings of Maar as the ‘weeping woman’ exist from that year. Picasso’s Guernica also marks the devastating bombing of Guernica by the Nazis in support of Franco’s Nationalist plans. Maar documented Picasso’s making of this iconic painting through a series of revealing photographs.

Even after their relationship ended, Dora Maar kept her apartment as a temple to the memory of Pablo Picasso.

### Try

Try Automatic writing, poetry or art, as used by the Surrealists. Try writing or drawing without conscious thought – doodle, take a line for a walk or write down words that come into your head. Try not to control what you are doing and see what happens! Collage unexpected images and words together (e.g. from newspapers and magazines) to create unusual surreal results.

Create a series of portraits of someone as Picasso did with Maar – try to really get to know and understand your sitter through doing multiple drawings of them from different angles, changing lighting/colour etc. You may want to evoke a certain mood – think about how you can achieve this.

Try switching your artistic approach or style to a form you don’t use as much – for example, go from graphic representation to abstract or surreal imagery. Move from visual art-making into poetry and prose or vice versa. See how one subject matter can be reinvented and reinterpreted in different artistic forms and approaches.

### Ask

How did Maar and Picasso influence and even merge into each other’s practice? Select a work or works by each of them and discuss these influences.

### Explore further

Look at the work of others in Maar and Picasso’s Surrealist circle; they had many mutual friends among the political, artistic, intellectual circles in Paris, including Man Ray, Andre Bréton, (founder of the Surrealist movement), and the poet Paul Eluard. Examples can be found within the exhibition e.g. see the Chance Encounter section.

Some of the Surrealist works of Paul Nash and Eileen Agar can also be seen in the exhibition. Agar said ‘Paul opened my eyes to the strange poetry of a place’ and helped her push the boundaries of her imagination. For Nash, their emotional connection inspired him to change his artistic approach, from rigid construction, organization and restraint, to a more free-flowing approach giving him, in his words, ‘new energy and poignant joy’.

Look at the shared exchanges and correspondence of Salvador Dali and Federico Garcia Lorca (some of which are shown in the exhibition). Aside from being admirers and advocators of each other’s work, they also encouraged each other in their respective mediums. Dali expanded out from visual art into writing poetry and Lorca branched out from writing into more prolific drawing and draughtsmanship.

## Emile Flöge and Gustav Klimt

Viennese artist Gustav Klimt’s relationship with Emilie Flöge was a partnership of equals and they were lifelong creative companions. In a process of co-creation, they were symbols of the new liberated man and woman, the alternative king and queen of fashionable Viennese society, trend and style setters of the highest order. Can you think of any equivalent couples today?

In turn-of-the-century Vienna, there was a unique zeitgeist. Vienna became the birthplace of an extraordinary number of new ideas that shaped the 20th century, including Freud’s psychoanalytic theories, Adolf Loos’ stripped-back Modernist architecture and Mahler’s startlingly unique music. Gustav Klimt led a group of artists in leaving behind old art practices. Known as the ‘Secession’, the group’s motto was: ‘To the Age its Art, to Art its Freedom’. In this context women were forging ahead in demanding equal rights. Emilie Flöge was one of a new kind of independent successful businesswoman and chief designer of the Schwestern Flöge, a couture house that she set up and ran from 1904–38 with her sisters. Many of Klimt’s most iconic paintings show his female subjects dressed in the highly patterned, flowing dresses designed by Flöge.

The most prominent sign of the new freedom for women was the so-called reform dress. Worn off the shoulder and with billowing lines, it allowed unconstrained movement of the body and the hated corset was no longer desirable or necessary. The style of the dress allowed for new levels of self-expression and freedom and was very much designed for the strong and confident woman. It was also seen as a unisex garment by more progressive men such as Klimt who often wore one to work.

Despite Klimt’s legendary number of lovers, numerous models and fascinated female patrons, he and Flöge maintained a personal, artistic and professional relationship. In 1908, at the height of his ‘golden period’, Klimt painted a pair of lovers in a legendary ode to love – the painting The Kiss – which presumably shows Flöge and Klimt in an intimate embrace. Enraptured and lifted out of this world, the lovers are depicted as a metaphor for eternal love, beyond ecstasy and eroticism – the eternal love of two soulmates, like Klimt and Flöge were throughout their lives.

### Try:

Create a range of textile designs or surface patterns using organic shapes and natural forms as inspiration.

Devise new fashion silhouettes. Looking at the radical ‘reform dress’ of the 19th/early 20th century, think of an equivalent garment for the 21st century – what considerations will you explore?

### Ask

Did the emancipation of women’s fashion help pave the way for further rights for women?

### Explore Further

Late 19th century and early 20th century Vienna was a melting pot of ideas, thinking and creativity including the Wiener Werkstatte (the Vienna Workshop) – a community of artists, designers and makers that Klimt and Flöge were closely involved with; the ground-breaking theories of Sigmund Freud; the architecture of Adolf Loos; composer Gustav Mahler; and painters Oskar Kokoschka and Egon Schiele.



Emilie Flöge and Gustav Klimt, Collection Villa Paulick, courtesy Klimt Foundation, Vienna.

**Credits:**

The exhibition *Modern Couples: Art, Intimacy and the Avant-garde* at the Barbican Art Gallery, London is curated by Jane Alison, Emma Lavigne, Elia Biezunski and Cloé Pitiot

This resource draws largely on the exhibition catalogue and texts written by Jane Alison and Coralie Malissard.

Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning

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