

20_a Cityscape I, 1963

Although often derided by those who embraced the native tendency toward realism, abstract painting was avidly pursued by artists after World War II. In the hands of talented painters such as Jackson Pollack, Robert Motherwell, and Richard Diebenkorn, abstract art displayed a robust energy and creative dynamism that was equal to America's emergence as the new major player on the international stage. Unlike the art produced under fascist or communist regimes, which tended to be ideological and narrowly didactic, abstract art focused on art itself and the pleasure of its creation. Richard Diebenkorn was a painter who moved from abstraction to figurative painting and then back again. If his work has any theme it is the light and atmosphere of the West Coast. As such, it touches the heart of landscape painting in America.

In Richard Diebenkorn's *Cityscape I*, the land and buildings are infused by the strong light of Northern California. The artist captured the climate of San Francisco by delicately combining shades of green, brown, gray, blue, and pink, and arranging them in patches that represent the architecture and streets of his city. Unlike *The Oxbow* by Thomas Cole (see 5-A), there is



20-A Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993), *Cityscape I*, 1963. Oil on canvas, 60¼ x 50½ in. (153.04 x 128.27 cm.). San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Purchased with funds from Trustees and friends in memory of Hector Escobosa, Brayton Wilbur, and J. D. Zellerbach. © Estate of Richard Diebenkorn.

no human figure in this painting. But like it, *Cityscape I* compels us to think about man's effect on the natural world. Diebenkorn leaves us with an impression of a landscape that has been civilized—but only in part.

Cityscape I's large canvas has a composition organized by geometric planes of colored rectangles and stripes. Colorful, boxy houses run along a strip of road that divides the two sides of the painting: a man-made environment to the left, and open, presumably undeveloped, land to the right. This road, which travels almost from the bottom of the picture to the top, should allow the viewer to scan the painting quickly, but Diebenkorn has used some artistic devices to make the journey a reflective one.

On the left, the vertical climb is slowed by sunshine that pours in across a lush green lot and abruptly changes the color of the road and the open area beyond. This bold horizontal movement continues across from the road to the open field on the right by means of a thin gray line (perhaps a small trail). Just below is a golden lot. To the left, a long white strip marks the contrast between shade and sun, developed and undeveloped environment. Above, the houses thin out and the landscape is interrupted only by small trees. The bird's-eye viewpoint used in the lower section of the painting shifts and slows the movement into space, and the dove-gray road widens, no longer appearing to narrow or recede. In fact, the whole upper portion of the painting seems flat or tilted up, like a rollercoaster track, where—at the apex of the climb—the journey momentarily stops, leaving the rider surrounded by only an intense, cloudless sky.

Diebenkorn emphasized the importance of the canvas's surface by the technique of applying color over color to construct a fluid image of a California landscape, changing his viewpoint from one part of the painting to another. He was interested in using the action and materials of painting to tell us about his subject not literally, but visually. *Cityscape I* is actually a combination of a closely observed, actual location (the left half) and an invented landscape (the right). Diebenkorn wanted to recreate what he saw rather than reproduce the exact setting. He had flown over the New Mexican desert as a young man and remained fascinated by the designs of nature he saw from an airplane. The high viewpoint here allows us to move above and over parcels of land, fitting them into complex shapes that lock together like a puzzle from one end of the canvas to the other. The artist wanted us to contemplate this puzzle. A painting, he wrote, "is an attitude. It's like a sign that is hung up to be seen. It says this is the way it is according to a given sensibility."

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Allow students to look carefully at the foreground, background, and sides of this landscape.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E

Ask students to identify triangles, trapezoids, and rectangles in this cityscape. *They are in the fields, buildings, and shadows.* Have students locate trees, windows, and a flight of steps in this scene. *Trees are near the top, windows are in a white building on the left, and steps are near the lower left.*

E

Have students view a landscape from an upper story or playground climbing structure. Ask them to compare this elevated view with how the scene looks when they stand on the ground. What do they notice from the higher view that they would not see if they were lower?

Where might Diebenkorn have been when he saw the cityscape for this painting? *He could have been in a tall building, on a high hill, or in a low-flying airplane. (He was impressed with the view from a plane when he was a young man.)*

E | M | S

Ask students how the two sides of the road in Diebenkorn's painting differ. Which side is man-made and which is undeveloped? *The left side is filled with gray and white buildings while the right side is undeveloped fields of green and gold.*

E | M | S

Ask students to describe the land in this scene. *It's hilly with green fields and gold earth.*

Show students photographs of San Francisco's hills to see the landscape that inspired this painting. Notice how steep the hills are.

E | M | S

Ask how Diebenkorn created a sense of depth in this scene. *Distant shadows and buildings are lighter and higher in the composition than those close to us.*

E | M | S

Ask students if this painting is more like life (realistic) or simplified (abstract). *It is more abstract.*

Ask how the buildings and fields are different from what they might actually see. *They are basic shapes and have very few details.*

By painting this scene abstractly rather than realistically, what message has Diebenkorn shown in this painting? *He focuses our attention on interesting colors, light, and geometric shapes.*

M | S

Tell students to follow the road back into this scene. How does Diebenkorn slow their eye movement through this landscape? *Horizontal shadow and light shapes slow the visual movement.*

M | S

Have students compare Diebenkorn's *Cityscape I* with Edward Hopper's *House by the Railroad*. How are they similar? *In both paintings light and shadow are extremely important. Both show buildings, but not people.*

How are they different? *Hopper's painting is much more detailed and realistic. Land fills most of Diebenkorn's composition.*

The sky and building are much more important in Hopper's. We look down on Diebenkorn's landscape from a bird's-eye viewpoint, but we look up at Hopper's.

Compare their moods. *Because of the bright, light colors, Diebenkorn's seems more upbeat and cheerful.*

INTERPRET

E

Ask students what time of day it might be in Diebenkorn's painting. Why do they think this?

The long shadows suggest that it's early morning or late afternoon.

M | S

Ask what factors affect the color and lightness of an actual landscape.

The weather, sunlight, and humidity or pollution in the air all affect how much light shines on a scene.

Ask students to describe the weather and air quality of this scene. *It's clear and dry.*

S

Ask students why abstract painting was popular in the United States after World War II. *Abstract art, with its energy and creativity, complemented the dynamism of the United States as it became a world leader. Also, abstract art demonstrated that in a democracy artists could express themselves freely, unlike artists in totalitarian countries who had to create art supporting government ideologies.*

CONNECTIONS

Historical Connections: communism; suburbanization

Historical Figures: Senator Joseph McCarthy

Geography: urban geography

Literary Connections and Primary Documents: *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller (secondary)

Arts: Abstract Expressionism; Bay Area Figurative movement