

Educator Guide

**AMERICAN**

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**ART DECO**

**DESIGNING FOR THE PEOPLE, 1918–1939**

October 8, 2021–January 2, 2022

**Frist** Art Museum

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# Tennessee State Standards

## Fine Arts Standards

By analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating artworks, students fulfill the Respond domain of Tennessee's Fine Arts Standards. Synthesizing information and contextualizing the works applies to the Connect domain. The Create domain includes the generation, conceptualization, development, and refinement of artistic work.

## Fifth Grade Social Studies

5.15 Identify the causes of the Great Depression, President Herbert Hoover's role, and its impact on the nation, including: consumer credit and debt, Hoovervilles, mass unemployment, soup kitchens.

5.48 Describe the effects of the Great Depression on Tennessee and the impact of New Deal policies in the state (i.e., Tennessee Valley Authority and Civilian Conservation Corps).

## High School Social Studies

### African American History

AAH.34 Analyze the impact of the Great Depression and the New Deal on the lives of African Americans.

### Tennessee History

TN.51 Describe how the Great Depression and New Deal programs impacted Tennesseans, including the significance of: the Agricultural Adjustment Act, Civilian Conservation Corps, Tennessee Valley Authority, and Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

### United States History

US.39 Analyze the causes of the Great Depression, including bank failures, laissez-faire politics, buying on margin, overextension of credit, crash of the stock market, overproduction in agriculture and excess consumerism manufacturing, high tariffs, and rising unemployment.

US.41 Describe the impact of the Great Depression on the American people, including mass unemployment, migration, and Hoovervilles.

## Critical Thinking in Context

These standards are designed to equip students with specific skills and strategies needed for working with STEM related concepts.

- 1) Develop claims and use evidence to form arguments
- 2) Engage in investigations through science and engineering practices to identify and define global issues, challenges, and real-world problems
- 3) Use research data to refine existing questions, problems, models, and arguments and/or to develop new questions, problems, models, and arguments

- 4) Discuss grade appropriate systemic methodology (e.g., scientific or engineering design practices, etc.) to investigate global challenges and real-world problems
- 5) Analyze the limitations, risks, and impacts of technology

## Introduction

For many, the words **Art Deco** conjure images of soaring skyscrapers, sleek automobiles, and luxurious household items. Geometric forms and streamlined ornamentation characterize this modern style, which emerged in France after World War I and quickly manifested stateside in a broad array of decorative and fine arts. This exhibition examines how Art Deco was adapted during a pivotal moment in American history, encouraging us to consider the optimism and glamour of the Roaring Twenties, along with the environmental and economic devastation of the 1930s.

The period between the world wars was a time of great social, political, and cultural change in America. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans left the South for economic opportunities and hopes of racial equity in northern and western cities; most women won the right to vote through the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920; and innovations in materials and production made new artistic designs widely available, thereby allowing more people to furnish their homes with the latest goods. At the same time, African Americans, Indigenous people, women, and immigrants faced discrimination across the country.

One hundred years later, the changes and challenges of the interwar years can shed light on our contemporary world. Like today, there were great disparities in wealth and opportunity, as well as systemic oppression at the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and class. People were learning how to navigate life again after a devastating pandemic. Also like today, many Americans hoped for a more equitable future when all would flourish and their voices would be heard—a hope expressed in many of the works on view.

## Questions

- What similarities are there between today and the 1920s and 1930s in American history? What are the major differences?
- How do you believe art can represent the American dream? What is the American dream to you?

## From Paris to America

The ambitious 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts) was a potent sign that Europe was recovering from the economic, physical, and social devastation of World War I. Held in Paris—considered the world’s most fashionable city at the time—the exposition and participating designers rejected historical styles and promoted modern architecture, interior design, and household goods with simplified lines and geometric forms, often made using precious materials. Design critics derived the name for this new style from the title of the exposition, dubbing it *Art Deco*.

Although American designers did not exhibit their work in the Paris Exhibition, wealthy patrons and representatives of manufacturers traveled from the United States to see the latest fashions, and many bought beautiful and expensive souvenirs. Americans who stayed home could read about the objects on display in magazine and newspaper articles. Some businesses in the United States imported French Art Deco objects.



On this vase, a background of flowers and fruit-bearing trees is framed by alligators molded in nearly opaque black glass. To create this vase, the workshop of renowned glass designer René Lalique made a positive wax model with a hollow interior. After blowing or casting hot glass into the mold, the wax was carefully chipped away, resulting in a unique object. The use of stylized, organic forms and a handmade touch to embellish functional objects were characteristic of French Art Deco.

René Lalique, designer (French, 1860–1945). Vase, ca. 1920–25. Glass, 13 1/4 x 4 7/8 in. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, Gift of Mrs. Oliver C. Mosman, 65–33

## **American Art Deco**

New materials and technologies were key to the development of Art Deco in the United States. In American-made products, the luxurious materials used by European manufacturers were often replaced with industrially produced alternatives. Recently invented plastics replaced ivory. Aluminum, steel, and chrome dazzled like silver. Inexpensive woods, such as maple and walnut, were stained to look like mahogany and ebony. As a result, more Americans could afford the new style and update their homes while supporting postwar commerce.

Many designers in the United States favored a modern outlook that embraced industrial and technological progress. They employed abstract designs and stylized forms to symbolize a dynamic future. This attitude was reflected in everything from skyscrapers and automobiles to clothing and radios. Inspired by contemporary European artistic movements, painters and printmakers also adopted these formal elements.

### **Questions**

- How did Paris and the International Exposition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts inspire American designers to embrace the Art Deco style?
- What stylistic elements are associated with Art Deco objects?

## An Architectural Era

Following World War I, industrial cities like Chicago and New York boomed. New skyscrapers marked the peak of the Art Deco style in the United States, becoming some of the tallest and most recognizable buildings in the world. Wealth from industries such as petroleum drilling, organic chemicals, and railroads allowed business executives to commission towering buildings made of steel and concrete. The exteriors were decorated with allusions to specific industries—lightning bolts for electricity, tires for automobiles, gas wells for petroleum. Lobbies were lavishly lined with imported marbles, silver and gold lighting fixtures, and dark mahogany furniture. Everything proclaimed power and success. Federal buildings were often constructed in the Art Deco style as well, and the Frist Art Museum, housed in Nashville’s former postal headquarters, exemplifies the aesthetic in the Grand Lobby.



Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889–1975).  
*Construction*, 1923. Ink with oil wash on canvas,  
27 3/4 x 23 3/4 in. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art,  
Kansas City, Missouri, Bequest of the artist, F75-21/42.  
© T.H. Benton and R.P. Benton Testamentary  
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Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Thomas Hart Benton was an American painter and muralist, whose naturalistically painted scenes of American life came to help define the **regionalist movement**. This oil sketch combines Benton’s drawings of buildings and laborers in and around New York City in the 1920s, revealing the transformation of the city as construction projects reshaped the landscape.

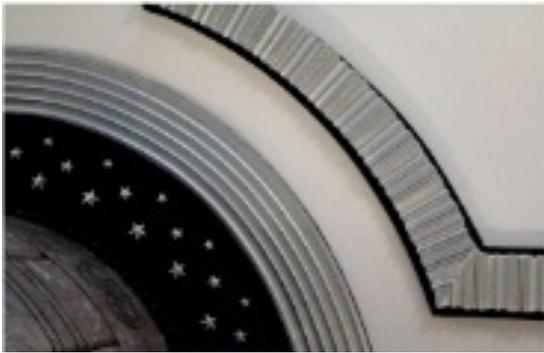
### A Landmark Repurposed: From Post Office to Art Museum

The historic landmark building that the Frist Art Museum is privileged to occupy was the former main post office. Constructed in 1933–34 under the direction of local firm Marr & Holman, the building was financed by the US Treasury Department’s Office of Construction. Following guidelines from the Office of the Supervising Architect, Nashville’s post office displays the two most distinctive architectural styles of the period: classicism and Art Deco.

During the Depression, architects working for the federal government were expected to express in their buildings the values of permanence, stability, and order—values that a classical style had traditionally embodied—but in forms streamlined to suggest progress and simplified to lower production costs. Inside the Frist Art Museum, cast aluminum doors and grillwork, as well as colored marble and stones on the floors and walls, follow the more decorative trend commonly known as Art Deco, which had developed in commercial interiors during the 1920s.



Lobby, Nashville post office. Image courtesy of the Marr & Holman Collection, Tennessee Historical Society, Tennessee State Library & Archives



Ceiling detail, Grand Lobby, Frist Art Museum.  
Photo: Karlie Odum

### Questions

- Describe Benton's painting. Discuss the relationship between the workers and what they are building.
- What purpose should buildings have? Should they simply be structural or also beautiful? Discuss and share your thoughts.
- The Frist Art Museum is in a repurposed building that was originally built as a post office. Why is it important to find new purposes for existing buildings?

## Americans on the Move

Although railroad systems connected the United States by 1869, the country's infrastructure of paved roads was largely developed in the 1910s and 1920s. Henry Ford's Model T, introduced in 1908, was the first automobile readily available to middle-class Americans. In 1927, Ford unveiled the Model A, a sleek, modern machine with faster speeds and better gas mileage. The United States had entered the era of the automobile.

While white Americans traveled on expanded highways, interstate movement for people of color was not always an expression of freedom. As the federal government forcibly removed Indigenous people from their ancestral lands, the mining, farming, and oil industries desecrated the nation's ecology. Fleeing persecution in the American South and seeking more job opportunities, many Black Americans moved north in a mass exodus known as the **Great Migration**.



Ford Motor Company, manufacturer (Detroit, Michigan, founded 1903). Model A Automobile, 1930. The Dishner Family Collection. Photo: Jerry Atnip

Henry Ford's vision of giving the common American access to an automobile profoundly impacted the day-to-day lives of millions of citizens. A decade after the company's incorporation in 1903, Ford Motors

opened the United States' first moving automobile assembly line in Highland Park, Michigan. The relatively high wages offered to Ford employees, as well as the low cost of the final product, enhanced the position of both worker and consumer. Made between 1927 and 1931, the sinuous curve of the Model A's fenders and geometric shape of its chrome radiator also reflect the then-popular Art Deco style.

Renowned designers and manufacturers created hood ornaments to add extra opulence to luxury cars. Although small in scale, these automobile accessories evoked speed, elegance, and fashion in the 1930s.



Raymond Loewy, designer (American, born France, 1893–1986); Hupp Motor Company, manufacturer (Detroit, Michigan, 1908–1941). Hupmobile Hood Ornament, 1936–38. Chromium-plated metal, 6 3/8 x 6 1/8 x 6 1/4 in. Marshall V. Miller Collection

### Questions

- How did the automobile change the United States?
- What are the Art Deco features of the Model A Automobile and the Hupmobile Hood Ornament?
- What are the stylistic features of cars today? What do the styles of different car models convey about current tastes?

### Activity: Sandcasting with Crayon Wax

*Sandcasting* is a process where liquid metal (usually bronze) is poured into a mold to make a sculpture. Using melted crayon wax (obtained by heating bits of crayon in individual aluminum muffin tins over a griddle or other heat source), paper or plastic bowls, and play sand, students with adult supervision and assistance can make a sandcast sculpture by shaping a negative image of an object in the sand and then having the wax poured in to cool.

See the complete lesson plan at [https://fristartmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/310\\_Sand\\_Casting\\_with\\_Crayon\\_Wax.pdf](https://fristartmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/310_Sand_Casting_with_Crayon_Wax.pdf)

## The New Woman

World War I was a turning point for American society. Women went to work—not only in direct support of the war, but also to fill thousands of job vacancies and maintain industrial and agricultural production. For the first time, a substantial number of middle-class women worked outside the domestic sphere, assuming roles as doctors, factory workers, nurses, secretaries, and more.

When men returned home from the front, many women did not want to sacrifice their independence. Galvanized by a glimpse of equality, more women advocated for their constitutional rights. On August 18, 1920, after the Tennessee legislature cast the last vote needed to ratify the Nineteenth amendment, the federal government prohibited states from denying citizens the right to vote on the basis of sex. African American, Asian American, Hispanic American, and Native American women, however, remained **disenfranchised**. The fight for full voting rights and equity continues today.



Maker unknown. Dress, 1920s. Cotton with reproduction sash, 50 x 36 x 1 1/2 in. Tennessee State Museum, 79.105.2

This summer dress is representative of the type of clothing worn by both suffragists and anti-suffragists during the special session of the Tennessee General Assembly called by Governor Albert Roberts to vote on ratifying the Nineteenth Amendment. The gold sash declares that the wearer was a suffragist; anti-suffragists wore red sashes. That summer, suffragists organized for the ratification effort and visited legislators in their home communities throughout Tennessee. On June 28, 1920, suffrage leader Katherine Kenny wrote, "I spent my Sabbath getting out letters to our twenty district chairmen advising them of our status and instructing them in their district work. As many of our legislators live in remote villages, I'm sure the poll will not be complete before the last of the week."

### Questions

- How did World War I change the role of women in American society?
- What did the Nineteenth Amendment grant? Did it achieve what it was designed to do?
- Consider the historical backdrop when the Nineteenth Amendment was passed. What new roles did women step into during this time?

## The Harlem Renaissance

During World War I, many African Americans enjoyed more self-determination at home and abroad. The war effort led to better jobs and, while the armed forces were still strictly segregated, Black soldiers experienced less discrimination in Europe. That autonomy, coupled with a growing concentration of Black people in northern cities because of the Great Migration and greater access to higher education through historically Black colleges and universities, fostered a flowering of African American literature, music, theater, and visual art. Originally called the New Negro Movement after Alain Locke's important 1925 anthology, the term **Harlem Renaissance** is now used to describe this interwar cultural effervescence, centered in that New York neighborhood, but present in many other cities around the country.

Aaron Douglas was one of the most important artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Douglas first came to Nashville from New York in 1930 to create a series of murals in his signature style of silhouetted figures and radiating bands of color for the International Student Center at Fisk University, an HBCU. Ten years later, he established the art department at Fisk, becoming its founding chair, and taught there for the next twenty-six years.

For his work *Building More Stately Mansions*, Aaron Douglas drew inspiration from Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem "The Chambered Nautilus," transforming the final stanza into a compelling visual statement:



Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,  
As the swift seasons roll!  
Leave thy low-vaulted past!  
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,  
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,  
Till thou at length art free,  
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!

Aaron Douglas (American, 1899–1979).  
*Building More Stately Mansions*, 1935.  
Oil on canvas, 54 x 42 in. Fisk University Galleries,  
Nashville, Tennessee. © 2021 Heirs of Aaron  
Douglas / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society  
(ARS), NY. Photo: Jerry Atnip

This painting, a version of which he also included in a mural series at Fisk University, presents a visionary scene of soaring architectural achievements and celebrates the contributions of

people of African descent to the progress of human civilization. Concentric bands of muted color suggest contiguous history and knowledge, linking the builders of the pyramids, temples, and churches of the past to the constructors of the skyscrapers of the present.

### **Questions**

- What was the Harlem Renaissance?
- Look closely at Aaron Douglas's *Building More Stately Mansions*. Identify familiar shapes, symbols, and imagery.
- What did Douglas want this painting to represent for students at Fisk University?

## The Jazz Age—a Culture of Change

Sidecars, bee's knees, Count Basie, the jitterbug, the Charleston—all evoke the swinging 1920s and 1930s in America. Art Deco objects and interiors with polished, mirrored, and gilded surfaces projected glamour and prosperity, even during a time of great contradictions. From 1919 to 1930, Prohibition declared that “intoxicating liquors” were illegal. Drinking alcohol went underground and behind closed doors, becoming even more fashionable.

Clubs sprang up. Dance halls, cabarets, and **vaudeville** acts blossomed. Jazz and the blues, both of which had originated in the African American South, attracted diverse audiences. Jazz could be thunderous and quiet, dark and often hopeful.

Although there was some social mixing of Black and white Americans, it was still a period of great segregation and inequity. Black bandleaders could play for white people but not stay in the same hotels as their audience. Drag shows allowed nontraditional articulations of gender within the confines of cabarets. Meanwhile, queer expression, breaches of segregation, and other violations of convention were still widely rejected across America.

The *Danse Moderne* plate captures the frenzied movements of the dances performed in 1920s and 1930s nightclubs. Stars and bubbles waft from cocktail glasses as a pair of dancers flies



across the floor, the man's eyes betraying his intoxication. This plate followed Viktor Schreckengost's Jazz Bowl series, commissioned by Eleanor Roosevelt to evoke New York at night. When the bowl gained popularity, Cowan Pottery Studio expanded the line.

Viktor Schreckengost, designer (American, 1906–2008);  
Cowan Pottery Studio (Lakewood, Ohio, 1921–1931).  
*Danse Moderne* Jazz Plate, 1931. Glazed ceramic,  
1 x 11 1/8 in. Collection Kirkland Museum of Fine &  
Decorative Art, Denver, 2001.0039. Image courtesy of  
Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art, Denver.  
Photo: Wes Magyar

### Activity

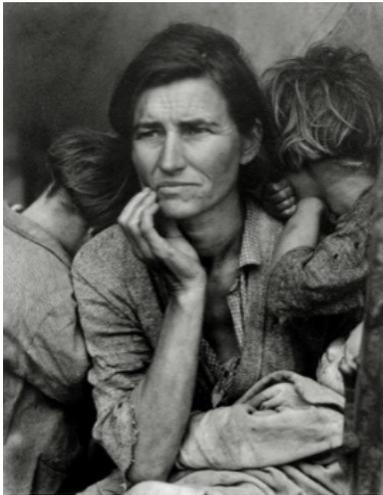
Providing paper plates and a variety of stamps, paint, colored pencils, brushes, and stencils, ask students to design their own decorative plates using the *Danse Moderne* Jazz Plate as inspiration. Have them reference current events and music or those of the Jazz Age to influence their imagery, emphasizing the role that social, political, and artistic movements can have on everyday items.

## Economic Depression and Stimulus

Americans suffered great economic hardships following the stock market crash of 1929, which halted industry and the growth of wealth. The **dust bowl** of 1930–36 added to the misery, especially in the Midwest. Destructive agricultural practices, compounded by massive drought, destroyed the ecology of the American prairies, and food was scarce.

Recovery began in 1933, facilitated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, which included a series of programs, financial reforms, and regulations. Public works projects constructed bridges, roads, and civic buildings. The government employed artists to document American life and decorate public spaces. Cities and businesses staged world's fairs to encourage consumers to purchase new objects, putting designers and factory workers back to work.

No other image from the 1930s evokes the human toll of the **Great Depression** as poignantly as *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*. Already a professional portrait photographer in the



early 1920s, Dorothea Lange was motivated by the social and economic devastation of the Depression and the dust bowl to leave her studio. She was working for the Farm Security Administration in 1936 when she recorded this migrant pea picker, thirty-two-year-old Florence Thompson, with three of her children. The photograph, which can be read as both a portrait and universal symbol, offers an iconic representation of humanity, dignity, vulnerability, and desperation.

Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, 1936, printed 1965. Gelatin silver print, 13 1/4 x 10 1/2 in. Sheldon Museum of Art, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Anna R. and Frank M. Hall Charitable Trust, H-1061.1965

### Questions

- Migrant workers are typically people who have to travel from job to job, particularly in the agricultural industry following the crop seasons. Many come from far away to work very long, hard hours. How are migrants portrayed today? Is it any different than in the 1930s?
- How has Lange framed the composition of this photograph to create emotional impact?

### Activity: Narrative Writing

Give students a minute or two to view and analyze Lange's *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*. Guide students by asking them what they see, how they feel about the image, and what they think about it. Then ask them to write a short narrative story from the perspective of either the mother or the children depicted in the photograph.

## Modern Living

As Americans recovered from the Depression, industries sold consumers a vision of the future full of gleaming household appliances like electric refrigerators and vacuum cleaners, mirrored radios, and sleek automobiles. Industrialization and technological advances in mass production made more goods accessible to a greater number of consumers, and labor-saving appliances also gave women more time to work outside the home or pursue leisure activities. New fashions, produced by large clothing factories, provided the latest styles to more people, allowing freedom of personal expression. Print and radio advertisements touted “the new” to ensure that “the old” became obsolete and unfashionable. The United States seemed to be speeding into a bright future full of progress.

The influx of scientists, designers, artists, and writers from Europe helped to spur economic recovery in the United States, yet many of these innovators were fleeing persecution and intolerance in their homelands. Unresolved racial and economic inequities in America, including segregation in the South and redlining banking practices throughout much of the country, were also becoming even more exposed and stark. The country’s optimistic outlook was about to be challenged again: a global war and internal conflicts were on the horizon.



Lurelle Van Arsdale Guild, designer (American, 1898–1985); Electrolux Corporation, manufacturer (Dover, Delaware, founded 1919). Electrolux Vacuum Cleaner (Model 30), designed 1937. Chrome-plated steel, aluminum, vinyl, and rubber, 8 1/2 x 23 x 7 3/4 in. Collection Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art, Denver, 2004.3466. Image courtesy of Kirkland Museum of Fine & Decorative Art, Denver. Photo: Wes Magyar

Combining the runners of a sleigh, the silhouette of a rocket, and the front of a train, the chrome plating and dynamic lines of the Electrolux Model 30 gave the impression that cleaning would be a breeze. From 1937 to 1954, nearly a million vacuums were sold for \$69.95 (\$1,100.00 in today’s dollars). However, Electrolux offered a lucrative financing option: a \$10.00 down payment could buy the Model 30 for \$6.00 per month, with an overall \$4.00 interest charge.

## Discussion

- How does the Electrolux vacuum reflect Art Deco characteristics?
- Think about the innovations that came out of the Art Deco era. Discuss their impact on American society at the time and even now.

**Activity: Observe and Redesign**

So many icons of the Art Deco style were ordinary objects. Have students look for typical household or classroom appliances and tools such as staplers, pencil sharpeners, and vacuums. Have them compare the design characteristics of these everyday items to those of the Art Deco era, as seen in objects like the Electrolux Vacuum Cleaner. Then let them freely discuss these objects, asking questions like:

- Can everyday objects be considered art?
- How do Art Deco appliances compare to those we see today?

After reflecting on these questions, have students select one everyday object and think about how they would redesign it for the future. What would they change about it? Would it look different? How would they improve its functionality?

## Glossary

**Art Deco:** a popular design style of the 1920s and 1930s characterized especially by bold outlines, geometric and zigzag forms, and the use of new materials

**Disenfranchised:** deprived of some right, privilege, or immunity; deprived of the right to vote

**Dust bowl:** a region that suffers from prolonged droughts and dust storms. The Dust Bowl was the name given to the drought-stricken Southern Plains region of the United States, which suffered severe dust storms during a dry period in the 1930s. (History.com)

**Great Depression:** the period of severe worldwide economic decline that began in 1929 and lasted throughout the 1930s and that was marked by deflation and widespread unemployment

**Harlem Renaissance:** a blossoming (ca. 1918–37) of African American culture, particularly in the creative arts, and the most influential movement in African American literary history (Brittanica.com)

**Regionalist movement:** emphasis on regional locale and characteristics in art or literature

**Vaudeville:** a light often comic theatrical piece frequently combining pantomime, dialogue, dancing, and song

*Definitions are from Merriam-Webster.com unless otherwise noted*

## Resources

### Books

*Jazz Age Josephine* by Jonah Winter (author) and Marjorie Priceman (illustrator)

*Sugar Hill: Harlem's Historic Neighborhood* by Carole Boston Weatherford (author) and R. Gregory Christie (illustrator)

*Harlem Renaissance Party* by Faith Ringgold (author and illustrator)

*Mama Mable's All-Gal Big Band Jazz Extravaganza!* by Anne Sieg (author and illustrator)

*Cinderella: An Art Deco Love Story* by Lynn Roberts (author) and David Roberts (illustrator)

### FristKids Video and Activity

Sandcasting a Sculpture

<https://fristartmuseum.org/resource/science-and-art/>

[https://fristartmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/310\\_Sand\\_Casting\\_with\\_Crayon\\_Wax.pdf](https://fristartmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/310_Sand_Casting_with_Crayon_Wax.pdf)

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