Expressive Gestures

Artists use their artwork to share their emotions, opinions, and ideas with their audience. This can take many different forms; some artists use color to create a mood, while others use symbols to convey information or experiment with their brushstrokes.

Let’s adventure through an inquiry about expression and the ways in which we might see it in action in the galleries.

THIS TOUR WILL EXAMINE ARTWORK IN GALLERIES 8, 26, AND 29
**GALLERY 8: MODERNISM**

*Turning* by Morris Louis

Look closely at the surface texture of Morris Louis’ canvas and compare it with some other paintings that you see in this gallery.

**Does the surface of his painting appear bumpy or smooth?**

Painters traditionally work on a primed canvas—one that has been prepared with a thick coat of gesso or glue to isolate or separate the textile (the canvas) from the paint. Louis’ technique is known as soak-stain painting, and he experimented with pouring thinned acrylic paint directly onto unprimed canvas, often folding and bending the canvas as the paint moved and absorbed into it—allowing Louis to focus on the expressions of the paint itself.

**Interesting Facts**

While Louis is often credited with discovering the soak-stain method, it was his friend, painter Helen Frankenthaler, who invented it. HoMA owns two of her works, one of which is on display nearby. Find Frankenthaler’s *Candle*.

**How do the expressions of the paint in Frankenthaler’s *Candle* compare to the expressions of a candle’s melting wax?**

ABOVE
Morris Louis (American, 1912–1962)
Purchase, Acquisition fund and funds from Academy Volunteers, 1971 (3997.1)

RIGHT
Acrylic on canvas. Gift of Barbara Higgins in honor of her son, Ron Higgins, 2010 (14259.1)
How does the clothing we wear express who we are or what we are interested in?

Birds are an important symbol in many Islamic stories, and roosters especially so. Their inclusion on this textile signals ideas of strength and vigor, representing pride in the development of the Islamic belief system.
Do you recognize the person represented in the painting? This portrait of the beloved Hawaiian music icon, Israel “Iz” Ka‘ano‘i Kamakawiwo‘ole, was painted just a few months after his death.

Artist Yan Pei-Ming painted this in grayscale—values ranging from darkest to lightest.

Why might he have made this choice?

What do the lighter-value brushstrokes tell you about the angle of the sun?

Do you think that Yan’s brushstrokes were fast-moving or slow and methodical?

How can you tell?