These two paintings were created by the same artist, in the same year, and have basically the same subject matter, yet they are extremely different. Take a moment to look closely at them. How did the artist use paint to create shapes and space in each work? What is the overall emotional impact of these styles?

Walt Kuhn was an artist during in the development of American Modernism: the breaking away of American artists from working in the traditional, realistic style of the academy with an emphasis on creating beauty. The new pieces began experimenting with abstraction of image: altering aspects of the subject so it looks different than to what it looks like in “real” life. Abstraction can be achieved in many ways, by using non-naturalistic color, exaggerating scale of some aspects of a subject, or by flattening the forms into two dimensional shapes and breaking the subject down into essential lines and shapes.

On the left, Kuhn works in a traditional style of painting. The colors of the subject are true to life and generally depicted in a realistic style. One could argue he has been influenced a bit by the loose brushwork of the Impressionists, but overall the painting is quite traditional and depicts depth and texture one would expect from a still-life of flowers.

On the right, the background has been reduced to flat areas of color. The flowers and leaves are also composed of flat areas of color with deeply contrasting shading. The image doesn’t have a lot of depth created through shadow and illusion of three dimensional space like the other.
Why the 1913 Armory Show Matters

In the 18th and 19th century artists were trained to create realistic works in the style of the high Renaissance at schools called academies. Around 1900, ideas about art in Europe was changing, and artists like the Impressionist and Fauvists were challenging ideas of what art was. In America, modern art was not yet accepted. Representational artists like Winslow Homer and William Bougeureau were valued over artists that challenged the academy.

A group of young, anti-Academy artists (including Walt Kuhn) organized in New York City and created the association of American Painters and Sculptors. This group put together an exhibit of over 1,300 art works by young American artists alongside European pieces. This exhibit, which became the famous Armory show of 1913, took place at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York City. The organizers wanted to showcase American art, but also expose Americans to new, modern European forms of art. They wanted Americans to see the “new” art and judge it for themselves.

The exhibition was seen by over 87,000 people before it traveled to Chicago. There was significant inflammatory, reactionary press coverage nationwide. More than any other event, the Armory Show got American talking about the avant-garde and abstraction and begged the ultimate question of what is art? The Armory Show marked the opening salvo of the American Modernism movement; American artists explored different styles and used abstraction as well as other methods to express the world around them.

William A. Bougeureau, La Petit Boudeuse (The Little Pouter), Oil, 1888, Gift of Mrs. John D. West

Bougeureau taught at the French Academy and his idealized, “beautiful” canvases represented the academy to many artists.

Marcel Duchamp’s Nude Descending a Staircase (left) and Henri Matisse’s Rouge Madre (right) were two of the most famous and influential works in the Armory Exhibit. Duchamp in particular was singled out in the media and in cartoons for his work that combined cubism and futurism. One critic described it as “explosion in a shingle factory.”
Who was Walt Kuhn?

Kuhn was one of a generation of American artists who transformed his love of contemporary European art into a distinctly American style. Born William Kuhn in Brooklyn, New York, in 1877, the painter and illustrator received his first artistic training at a polytechnic institute in Brooklyn. At the age of twenty-two he moved to San Francisco, worked as a cartoonist, and began using "Walt" to sign his work. From 1901 to 1903, Kuhn studied in Europe, first at the Académie Colarossi in Paris and then at the Royal Academy in Munich. Although he settled in New York upon his return, Kuhn's European experience continued to inform his work throughout his career.

In New York, Kuhn initially worked again as a cartoonist for popular magazines and also became involved in the planning of the Armory Show. He traveled to Europe with Arthur B. Davies, the show's director, to select avant-garde art for display in the pivotal 1913 exhibition. From 1912 to 1920 he also advised John Quinn, a wealthy art patron, on purchases of French art and after 1930 served in a similar capacity for Marie Harriman, a collector and gallery owner. At this time, he was painting figure studies and still-lifes that were influenced by both the cubist and expressionist idioms. Gradually, however, Kuhn developed a personal style in which he placed flattened, simplified, outlined forms, often rendered in brilliant color, against a dark background. He often painting portraits of showgirls and members of the circus. He died in 1949.
Stuart Davis’ *Downtown Street, 1931*

In 1913, Davis was one of the youngest artists to exhibit his work in the Armory Show. Davis was particularly impressed by the abstract artists and Cubism. He adopted a looser brush and flattened his forms into shapes. In the 1920s, Davis began to develop his signature style: urban street scenes with an emphasis on familiar landmarks and incorporating advertisements. He is considered to have developed a fresh, American take on European Cubism, with bright colors and strong lines reminiscent of jazz music. Davis is often cited as the “Father of Pop Art” due to his flattening of forms and continued inclusion of advertisements and signs in his city scenes.

Georgia O’Keeffe’s *Birch and Pine Tree II, 1925*

O’Keeffe did not exhibit in the Armory Show, however she was very influenced by the critical response to the theories of modern art that emerged. O’Keeffe developed a signature style inspired by nature, famous for her abstractions of flowers and landscapes. In this piece, elements of the trees are distilled down to their barest essentials, almost just shape and color.

Known as the Mother of American Modernism, Georgia O’Keeffe grew up in Sun Prairie, near Madison, Wisconsin. She studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and Art Students League in New York City before teaching high school art for two years. She returned to the New York art scene and met Alfred Stieglitz, a gallery owner and renowned photographer who later became her