

# AGNES MARTIN

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## Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Teacher Resource Unit

This exhibition traces Agnes Martin's (1912–2004) career from her early experiments of the 1950s through her mature works and final paintings. It is the first comprehensive survey of the artist's work to be mounted since her death in 2004. Martin's subtle and evocative canvases had a major influence on artists of her time and beyond, particularly in how they explore endless variations within a limited set of elements. By 1960 she had developed her signature grid—interlocking horizontal and vertical lines drawn in pencil on large square canvases. Up close the lines have a handmade, intimate quality but as one moves away they create a series of visual effects. In the 1970s Martin began to work predominately with stripes, though she returned to grids at times. Her arrangements of coordinates, lines, and stripes shifted in scale and rhythm across her works and often within series.

The Guggenheim's presentation of *Agnes Martin* is cocurated by Tracey Bashkoff, Senior Curator, Collections and Exhibitions, and Tiffany Bell, Guest Curator.

This Resource Unit focuses on various aspects of Martin's art and provides techniques for exploring both the visual arts and other areas of the curriculum. This guide is available on the museum's website at [guggenheim.org/artscurriculum](http://guggenheim.org/artscurriculum) with images that can be downloaded and/or projected for classroom use. The images may be used for educational purposes only and are not licensed for commercial applications of any kind. Before bringing your class to the Guggenheim, we invite you to visit the exhibition, read this guide, browse our website, and decide which aspects of the exhibition are most relevant to your students. For more information on scheduling a visit for your students, please call 212 423 3637.

*Agnes Martin* is organized by Tate Modern, London, in collaboration with the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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*I don't believe in negative art.*<sup>1</sup>

## < ABOUT THE ARTIST >

Agnes Martin (1912–2004) was born on a farm in the Canadian province of Saskatchewan in 1912. She was descended from Scottish immigrants on both sides. When she was two years old, her father died, leaving her mother to raise four children on her own. A few years later, the family moved to Vancouver, where Martin's mother, a stern disciplinarian, bought, renovated, and sold houses for a living. Martin's happiest memories of childhood were with her maternal grandfather, a farmer about whom she recalled, "I was his favorite and he was mine."<sup>2</sup>

Martin said she did not take art lessons as a child, but the women of her family did have great skill at traditional crafts: "every time they sat down, all their lives—knitting, hooking rugs."<sup>3</sup> Her family was also athletic. Martin was an excellent swimmer who tried out for the Canadian Olympic team in her youth. After a move to the United States to take care of an ill sister, she decided she wanted to stay in the country but needed a job to become a citizen. She went to school to get her teacher's certificate and taught in public schools for a few years. It was not until she attended Teachers College at Columbia University and immersed herself in the museums of New York that, at the age of thirty, she realized she wanted to focus on a new vocation. She wanted to be an artist. Martin's work can be grouped broadly into two periods: work done up until 1967, at which point



Alexander Liberman, Agnes Martin with level and ladder, 1960.  
Alexander Liberman Photography Archive, Getty Research Institute,  
Los Angeles. Photo: © J. Paul Getty Trust

she left New York and abandoned art-making for several years, and work made after settling in New Mexico from 1972 until her death in 2004.<sup>4</sup>

During the first period—a span of more than twenty years—she developed her technique while moving frequently. Betty Parsons (1900–1982), a gallery owner who represented many of the most important artists of the era, recognized Martin's talent and helped her move to New York City in 1957. There Martin was influenced by other artists living nearby on Coenties Slip in lower Manhattan. She struggled with mental illness and was eventually diagnosed with schizophrenia and hospitalized in 1962. She continued to work and, by 1963, began to focus on signature elements of her work, making large square paintings, consistently 72 by 72 inches or slightly larger, with the grid as their compositional structure. By 1964 she was making some of her most innovative work, penciled grids on minimally prepared canvases that collapsed distinctions between painting and drawing.

In 1967 Martin unexpectedly left New York and embarked on a road trip across the United States and Canada for one and a half years. She mostly traveled alone and did not make art during this period. According to Martin, a vision of an adobe brick finally led her to settle in New Mexico. Once there, she lived on a mesa with no telephone or electricity. In 1972 she began her second phase of art making, during which she produced square paintings, often in series, that feature horizontal and vertical stripes.

Martin's work is not easily categorized. She aligned herself most closely with the Abstract Expressionists, a group of post-World War II artists, many of whom sought to express their inner psyche through formally inventive abstraction. "I consider myself one of them," she said.<sup>5</sup> Yet she

was far closer socially to the Coenties Slip community of artists. This latter group of artists did not share a distinct style but were bound more by where they lived.

Martin's paintings have been compared to prayers, religious utterances, or spiritual experiences, but she insisted her works are not spiritual. She wanted people to become aware of the perfection, beauty, and joy in the world around them. Like several other artists working in the 1950s and '60s, she was influenced by Taoism and its message of eliminating desire and renouncing egotism. Martin did not seek the spotlight that artists of her time began to benefit from. Instead, she lived simply, worked hard, and believed that her abstractions could explore the "subtle emotions of happiness."<sup>6</sup> She died at the age of ninety-two in 2004.

*I saw all the paintings in all the museums. Then I thought, if you could possibly be a painter and earn a living—which you can't—then I would like to be a painter. That's when I started painting.*<sup>7</sup>

## < EARLY WORK >

Agnes Martin's earliest datable works are landscapes she painted as a student and teacher in New Mexico in the late 1940s. Created outdoors, they capture her love for the desert environment she would call home not just during this early period but for over thirty years in the later part of her life. Martin was not the first artist to fall for New Mexico. Artists escaping urban industrialization in the nineteenth century, Regionalist artists capturing local scenes and places between the wars, and Abstract Expressionist painters in the late 1940s and early '50s traveled to the state, and some made it their permanent home. Arguably the most famous of this latter group was Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986), who settled there in 1940 and was friends with Martin. Both were female artists who gained recognition in the male-dominated art worlds of their eras.

Some think this rich creative environment in New Mexico caused Martin to seek out abstract art during her early periods in New York City, as she had already started making biomorphic, abstract works while in the Southwest. With their large scale and organic shapes, her paintings began to resemble the early works of Abstract Expressionism while still evoking the American landscape.

In 1957 Martin was persuaded to move to New York by the gallery owner Betty Parsons. Parsons purchased several of Martin's paintings in order to finance the artist's move to New York and then helped her settle on Coenties Slip in lower Manhattan, near many young artists who were living in lofts. Artists in this area, such as Ellsworth Kelly (1923–2015), James Rosenquist (b. 1933), and Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008), were defining themselves in opposition to the older Abstract Expressionists, who lived farther uptown, though Martin felt aligned with both groups. It was in this environment that Martin's biomorphic images transformed into geometric shapes, flatter surfaces, and the grid format that she would later become known for. The path to her signature style was not direct but filled with experimentation often inspired by her peers.



*Harbor Number 1*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 49 3/4 x 40 inches (126.3 x 101.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Agnes Gund and Committee of Painting and Sculpture Funds, 1996

# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Harbor Number 1*, 1957

- ▶ Ask students what they notice about *Harbor Number 1*. How would they describe the colors, shapes, and composition?
- ▶ How would they describe the mood of the painting? Why would they describe it in this way? Consider offering mood words to start the discussion, such as dreary, jubilant, playful, distressed, melancholic, and hopeful.
- ▶ Tell students the title of the painting and ask them how they think it relates, if at all, to what they have noticed.
- ▶ Agnes Martin had just moved to New York City when she painted this. In New York, she lived and worked in a loft on Coenties Slip with sweeping views of the East River and Brooklyn Bridge. (As a class, find and look together at a photograph of Coenties Slip.) Martin said her work was “non-objective. Not about the world or nature, or things like that.”<sup>8</sup> But others have seen nature’s influence in her color palette. Ask students if they think her palette was derived from nature. Why or why not?
- ▶ Martin was influenced by the artists who surrounded her. Her gallerist, Betty Parsons, wanted Martin to be in New York City around other artists and, as she told another artist, “fight the battle where it’s taking place.”<sup>9</sup> Ask students what they think Parsons meant by this. What are the advantages of being in the same place with other artists? What are the possible advantages of being distant from the “battle?”

# EXPLORATIONS

## FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Agnes Martin renounced her early works, burning many of them. She said, “I never wanted to sell it because it was not what I wanted and I knew that it was not what I was *supposed* to be doing.”<sup>10</sup> Ask students if they have ever been embarrassed by something they did or created. After they have shared their experiences, ask them to discuss why art historians might be interested in Martin’s early work and wish it was not destroyed. Finally, assign students to study the early work of a different artist. They should then write about and present on what they have learned about the artist from studying his or her early work.
- Martin used a limited palette in her paintings. Nearly monochromatic, white or gray paintings constitute the bulk of her work, but she also frequently used pale, low-intensity colors. Ask students to discuss why artists might limit themselves to certain colors. Next, challenge students to create their own palette. Offer students red, blue, yellow, white, and black paint. Invite them to experiment with mixing colors and then choose three to five colors they want to work with most. Why did they choose those colors?
- Ask students if they have ever been inspired by a place. If so, how? Like Martin, many artists have been inspired by the landscape and culture of New Mexico. Others also were inspired by the deserted sailmaking lofts of Coenties Slip, which was once a major landing place for wooden ships. Martin said her work was “non-objective. Not about the world or nature, or things like that.”<sup>11</sup> Places like New Mexico and Coenties Slip, however, were important to her. For this exploration, challenge students to free-write about a place they have felt an emotional connection to. Encourage them to write without editing themselves. Then ask them to identify the words they have written that best capture their experience of the place. Arrange these words into short statements or even poems. Share the responses as a class. Are there any common threads? What makes a place inspiring?

*I used to pay attention to the clouds in the sky . . . I paid close attention for a month to see if they ever repeated. They don't repeat. And I don't think life does either. It's continually various. That's the truth about life.*<sup>12</sup>

## < SERIES >

After settling in New Mexico in 1972, Agnes Martin began work on a portfolio of thirty prints called *On a Clear Day*. These prints all depict grids or parallel, horizontal lines with different spacing and proportions. From that point on, she painted stripes and used fewer lines per canvas compared to her dense grids of the 1960s. She also started to work in series and explore repetition over many works instead of in just one image.

Martin called this change a shift from joy to happiness and often used natural metaphors to describe her work. For instance, she compared the experience of viewing her series, which

change subtly from one piece to the next, to watching clouds and never seeing any that are exactly alike, or to viewing waves breaking on a shore, each similar but different.<sup>13</sup>

For nearly twenty years, Martin created her series on a large scale (72 by 72 inches). In the 1980s she began to paint in a range of shades of gray. For these paintings, such as *Fiesta* and *White Flower II* (both 1985), she focused on horizontal divisions of 6-foot-square canvases. From canvas to canvas, she varied the size of the painted bands, intervals of penciled lines, and tone of grays.



*White Flower II*, 1985. Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 x 72 inches (182.9 x 182.9 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri, Purchase, Nelson Gallery Foundation



*Fiesta*, 1985. Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 72 1/16 x 72 1/8 inches (183 x 183.2 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, The American Art Foundation 92.4025

# VIEW + DISCUSS

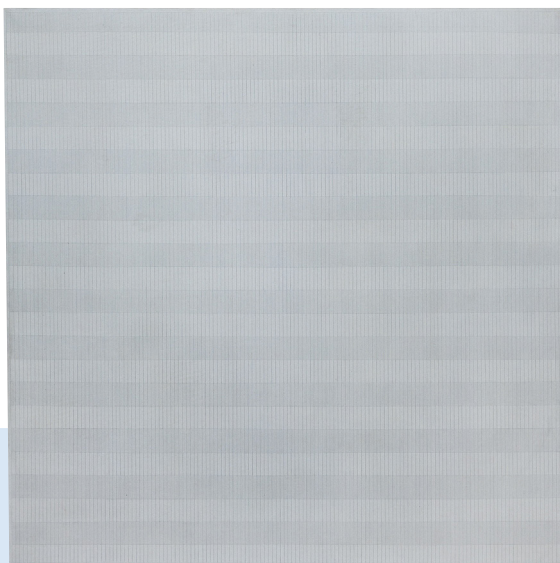
Show: *White Flower II*, 1985  
*Fiesta*, 1985

- ▶ Ask students to discuss: What is a series? Why do artists work in series?
- ▶ Tell them that Agnes Martin worked primarily in series during the second half of her career. Look together at *White Flower II* and *Fiesta*, two works from a related group of paintings. Ask students to compare them. Which elements are similar and which are different? How does the alteration of one element change the effect of the canvas as a whole?
- ▶ Ask students to try to imagine what other paintings in the series look like. What are the different possibilities? How could the elements be arranged into different but related permutations?
- ▶ What do students think the effect would be of seeing all of the paintings in a series hung together in a gallery? How would that compare to seeing just one alone?
- ▶ These paintings are just two of many works that were made on large 6-foot-square canvases, in gray tones, and with horizontal lines. What other sets of abstract elements do students think would be interesting to explore in a number of ways?

## EXPLORATIONS

### FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- In Martin's series, several elements remain the same across canvases, while one element changes. For instance, she might work using the same color palette and all horizontal lines, but the distance between those lines could vary between paintings. For this activity, encourage students to create a series of drawings using these guidelines. Students should choose several elements that stay the same and one that changes. Students could think about direction and type of lines, colors, size of the paper, drawing instrument, etc. Encourage students to make at least three or four drawings with these predetermined rules. Ask students how it feels to work with these restrictions. Then ask them to compare the drawings. What did they learn about how individual elements affect the overall composition?
- Martin was an avid writer who recorded her ideas about art and beauty. Challenge students to experiment with the idea of series within writing. Ask them to look at the artwork in this section and write five words in response to it. Then ask them to write five more words, using four of the same words and changing only one. The words can be arranged in any order. Continue this slight change three more times until students have five different lines. Ask them to look at their writing and think about how the subtle shift in language changes the meaning and impact of the lines. Invite them to read their five lines aloud to the class.
- Challenge students to create another painting in this group. Make sure it relates to both *White Flower II* and *Fiesta* but is also different. Compare students' responses. What elements did they alter? What stayed the same?



*When I first made a grid I happened to be thinking of the innocence of trees and then this grid came into my mind and I thought it represented innocence, and I still do, and so I painted it and then I was satisfied. I thought, this is my vision.<sup>14</sup>*

*The Tree*, 1964. Oil and graphite on canvas, 72 x 72 inches (182.8 x 182.8 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Larry Aldrich Foundation Fund, 1965

## ◀ GRIDS ▶

The grid is a signature element of Martin's artistic style, but there is nothing systematic about the way she used it. She shifted its scale and proportions from work to work, and her use of the form evolved over time. "When I cover the square surfaces with rectangles," she said, "it lightens the weight of the square, destroys its power."<sup>15</sup>

Though Martin spoke of the grid coming to her as a vision, she was likely influenced by her regular contact with artists in New York who were using reduced geometric forms—such as Barnett Newman (1905–1970) and Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967)—as well as at least one artist experimenting with textiles and weaving, Lenore Tawney (1907–2007), though Martin rejected any connections between her work and weaving.<sup>16</sup> The grid was already a prominent part of modernist abstract painting. For painters such as Piet Mondrian (1872–

1944) it offered a way to eschew symbols and representation, emphasize the flatness of the picture plane, and experiment with various configurations. For Martin, the grid represented innocence. Though grand, her grid paintings were created from small repetitive gestures and simple means. They required a painstaking and labor-intensive process that, for her, emphasized the importance of humility and modesty.

Many works Martin created after 1964 cannot be classified as either drawing or painting. Her grids were drawn with graphite and colored pencils on large painted canvases. By combining techniques, Martin created a dynamic effect. *The Tree* (1964), for instance, is made up of an overall linear grid. From far away, one sees gray horizontal bands, but up close these bands reveal themselves to be closely spaced, parallel pencil lines.

# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *The Tree*, 1964

- ▶ Ask students what they associate with grids. What adjectives do grids bring to mind?
- ▶ Now look together at Agnes Martin's *The Tree*. Together, list adjectives to describe this artwork. How do these adjectives compare to the ones students used to describe grids in general.
- ▶ Martin made her grid paintings by drawing with pencil onto painted canvases, almost all of which were quite large after 1962. *The Tree* is 6 by 6 feet. It is difficult to capture all the details of her paintings in a photograph, but ask students if knowing the materials and size of the work influences their thoughts about it as they look at the photograph. What do they think it would be like to see this work in person?
- ▶ Martin used measuring tape or string stretched across the canvas to guide her pencil as she drew her grids. She also used rulers and other straightedges, such as boards. Ask students what they think the challenges and/or joys of this process could be.
- ▶ Many of Martin's titles reference nature, but most of her paintings are completely abstract. She titled this piece *The Tree*. Ask students how they think the title relates to the artwork, if at all.
- ▶ Read students the quote at the beginning of this section. Ask them how they think the idea of innocence is related to trees and grids.

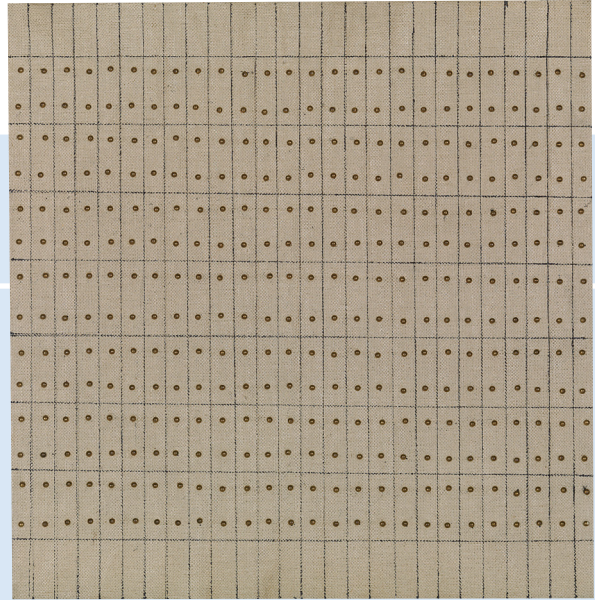
## FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- The grid was the principle compositional structure for Agnes Martin's paintings for many years. Ask students to define the grid. What needs to be present for something to be a grid? What elements can vary within a set of grids? Assign students to small groups and challenge each group to create at least ten different grids. These can be drawn with pencil and colored pencils, painted and drawn, or created on computers or other technological devices. Compare the grids that students produce. In what ways can one single format like the grid vary? Are there infinite variations? Challenge students to describe the grids in mathematical language (i.e. using fractions).
  - As an extension to this activity, have students make grids by hand and then digitally. Compare these two types of grids. How does the handmade grid differ from the digital one in quality or tone?
- Martin's grid paintings have often been compared to woven textiles. Though Martin rejected this comparison, she grew up surrounded by traditional crafts and was friends with the fiber artist Lenore Tawney. Give students a chance to experiment with weaving. They can make simple looms by gluing four popsicle sticks into a square and wrapping string around the sticks to form the weft. They can then use varied strips of materials (ribbon, fabric, string, etc.) as the warp to weave into the weft. What is the process like for students? How might it compare to the act of drawing a grid, if at all?
- Many people have used emotional terms to describe Martin's grid paintings. Her long time gallery owner called the lines of her paintings "heartstrings pulled out, endlessly."<sup>17</sup> Martin said, "I want to draw a certain response. . . . that quality of a response from people when they leave themselves behind, often experienced in nature, an experience of simple joy."<sup>18</sup> A critic wrote, "Once you are caught in one of her paintings, it is an almost painful effort to pull back from the private experience she triggers to examine the way the picture is made."<sup>19</sup> Have students ever had strong emotional reactions to artwork? Challenge students to write about their emotional reactions to Martin's paintings, positive or negative. Encourage students to use metaphorical language. Ask each person in the class to read a line of their writing. Do students think their reactions might be different after seeing the paintings in person? Why or why not?

*I paint with my back to the world.*<sup>20</sup>

## < MATERIALS AND PROCESS >

Agnes Martin, an artist known for her minimal, two-dimensional work, found surprising inspiration in three-dimensional experimentations. In 1957, after moving to Coenties Slip in New York, she became close to artists working in neighboring lofts. These artists' experiments with found objects inspired her to become more adventurous in her use of materials and techniques. Like them, she began to scavenge for detritus in the dockside neighborhood. She preferred objects with regular circular or square shapes, such as bolt heads, nails, tacks, buttons, bottle caps, and boat spikes, which she used to mark out spatial coordinates. This emphasis on coordinates versus forms changed her painting practice. She herself said that her "lines began as points in space" and that she "started off on the right path with the line of nails."<sup>21</sup> Martin continued to use nails even after moving on from her most experimental constructions—many of which she destroyed because she considered them "too aggressive."<sup>22</sup> In *Little Sister* (1962), for instance, Martin drew a grid with ink on an oil-painted canvas and added brass nails to create a staccato rhythm within the grid. Soon after, however, she stopped using three-dimensional elements in her work.



*Little Sister*, 1962. Oil, ink, and brass nails on canvas and wood, 9 7/8 x 9 11/16 inches (25.1 x 24.6 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Andrew Powie Fuller and Geraldine Spreckels Fuller Collection 2000.40

Martin described her art-making process as beginning with time spent in her rocking chair, clearing her mind, and waiting for inspiration to hit. Next came many complex steps. She made extensive mathematical calculations and then small-scale studies and drawings. Finally, she would paint and draw in a larger format. After coating the surface of her canvas with oil paint (or acrylic, by 1964), she would draw lines with pencil, guided by a straightedge, or, perhaps, measuring tape or string stretched across the canvas. Though these lines appear straight and sharp from a distance, close up one can see how the pencil veered off course when it encountered irregularities on the surface of the canvas.

# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Little Sister*, 1962

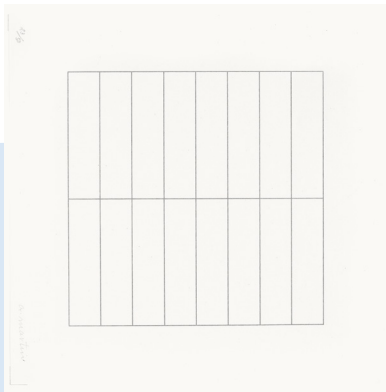
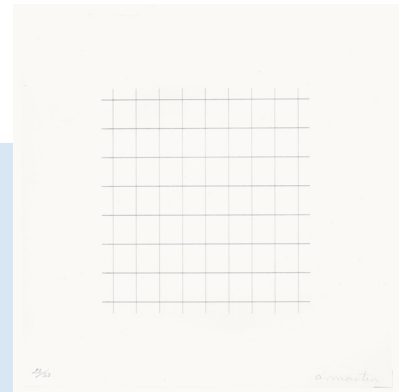
- ▶ Look together at *Little Sister*. Ask students what they notice.
- ▶ Ask them to describe what is regular about the artwork. Then ask them to describe what is irregular.
- ▶ Just from looking at the image, what can they guess about the materials and techniques Agnes Martin used?
- ▶ Tell them that during this period in Martin's career she was experimenting with found objects, such as nails, that she collected near her dockside loft. With these nails, she marked coordinates in space, which later evolved into the lines of her signature painted grids. This artwork combines both a grid and nails. Ask students to imagine the work without the nails. How would it be different? What do the nails add?
- ▶ Tell students that Martin made extensive mathematical calculations in order to complete her grids. Ask them to discuss what kinds of calculations they think would be necessary to create this grid.

## EXPLORATIONS

### FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Martin associated with many artists who experimented with found objects. Robert Indiana (b. 1928), who lived in a nearby loft, described his process as transforming “the Lost into the Found, Junk into Art, the Neglected into the Wanted, the Unloved into the Loved, Dross into Gold.”<sup>23</sup> Martin briefly used found objects with regular circular or square shapes—including bolt heads, nails, tacks, buttons, bottle caps, and boat spikes—to mark out spatial coordinates on otherwise two-dimensional surfaces. In both Martin's and Indiana's art, such objects reflected the place where they lived and worked. Challenge students to spend a few days collecting objects in their neighborhood. Look together at what students find. Discuss: What can you tell about a place by its discarded objects? Now challenge students to use these objects to make an artwork. They could combine the objects with traditional materials, such as paper or canvas, like Martin did. Or they could only use found objects, like how Indiana made his sculptures (an art type known as assemblage). Look together at what students create. How do their artworks reflect the places they inhabit?
- Before creating an artwork, Martin often made extensive mathematical calculations. Ask students if they think her paintings could be translated into mathematical statements. Why or why not? The artist Sol Lewitt (1928–2007) was influenced by Martin. He is most famous for artworks he did not make himself. Instead, he wrote instructions that others could follow to create his artworks. Challenge students to first draw a grid and then write mathematical instructions for a classmate to recreate it. How does the classmate's grid compare to the original? What gets lost in the mathematical translation?
- Some writers have said that, for Martin, the process of drawing grids was a meditative experience and that it was related to her interest in Buddhism. Discuss the tenets and practices of Buddhism together as a class. How do students think Buddhism relates to Martin's process and artworks? What other artistic processes do they think could be inspired by Buddhist beliefs? Brainstorm ideas as a class and then challenge students to explore one of these processes.

*It is commonly thought that everything that is can be put into words. But there is a wide range of emotional response that we make that cannot be put into words. We are so used to making these emotional responses that we are not consciously aware of them till they are represented in art work.*<sup>24</sup>



*On a Clear Day*, 1973. Portfolio of 30 screenprints, 12 x 12 inches (30.5 x 30.5 cm) each. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Purchased with funds provided by the Kotick Family Foundation in honor of Lynda and Stewart Resnick through the 2007 Collectors Committee

## ◀ INFLUENCES AND WRITINGS ▶

Agnes Martin was a prolific writer and reader. Her words provide a window into her mind and add a dimension to her paintings that, for many, can be difficult to understand. Her writing draws from many different sources and perspectives. Martin was well versed in Old Testament Calvinism, visionary Christianity, Platonism, transcendentalism, Vedanta, Zen Buddhism, and Taoism.<sup>25</sup>

She was raised in a strict Calvinist household but rejected religion, especially the doctrine of predestination, which holds that, from the beginning, some people are chosen for salvation and others for damnation. “Everyone is chosen and everyone knows it,” she wrote.<sup>26</sup> While she renounced many aspects of Calvinism, her intense familiarity with the Old Testament comes through in the major themes of her work: humility, obedience, and praise.

Martin was influenced by both Western philosophy—Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, for instance—and Asian philosophy (sometimes through Western writers, such as

William Blake [1757–1827], who was interested in Vedanta, a school of Hindu philosophy). She was introduced to Western philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952) during her training as a teacher, and he continued to have a powerful influence on her. She shared Dewey’s beliefs that art is not an object but an experience that arises in the mind of the viewer or artist and that the role of artists, like teachers, is to provide a safe space for engagement with the world.

After World War II, interest in Asian philosophies and practices grew in the United States, especially among artists. Martin said her greatest spiritual inspiration was Lao Tzu’s teachings on Taoism.<sup>27</sup> Taoism’s emphasis on the transcendence of nature and integration of body and mind is apparent in Martin’s writings, as in the quote at the top of this section. Like many other artists, she cited Zen Buddhism as an influence. For Martin, the Zen belief that all humans could attain enlightenment was in direct contrast to Calvinist predestination and more in line with her own philosophy.

# VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *On a Clear Day*, 1973

- ▶ Tell students that Agnes Martin was not only an artist but also a prolific writer. Compare the modes of communication. What are the benefits and drawbacks of each?
- ▶ Ask students to pick one of the prints from this portfolio and, without telling anyone which they picked, to write about it. Have students read their text aloud. Can others match the writing to the prints? Were the lines metaphorical, emotional, associative, or descriptive?
- ▶ Ask students to look at the series and think about how each image relates to the whole. Challenge them to write something to describe the entire set of prints.
- ▶ Look together at a passage Martin wrote in 1975 with the same title. Ask students to compare her writing to her artwork. What connections do they see?

## *On a Clear Day*

*Art work that is completely abstract—free from any expression of the environment is like music and can be responded to in the same way. Our response to line and tone and color is the same as our response to sounds. . . . It holds meaning for us that is beyond expression in words.*

*These prints express innocence [sic] of mind. If you can go with them and hold your mind as empty [sic] and tranquil as they are and recognize your feelings at the same time you will realize your full response to this work.<sup>28</sup>*

## FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- *On a Clear Day* is a portfolio of thirty screenprints that Martin created after not making art for five years. Ask students to look at the passage that Martin wrote in response to the work. Then challenge students to write a response to that passage. What do they think of her comparison between art and music? What do they think of her description of how to “realize your full response to this work?” Can they make connections to their own lives and experiences?
- Martin’s beliefs evolved over time in a constant relationship with the people she encountered and writers she read. She was raised by strict Calvinists and deeply influenced by the Old Testament yet later said she did not believe in religion. One of her first important influences was her maternal grandfather, whose perspective often contrasted with Calvinism: “I think he believed in Love more than he believed in God. I certainly do too,” Martin said.<sup>29</sup> Later influences included Plato, John Dewey, William Wordsworth (1770–1850), Taoism, and Zen Buddhism, as well as some artists and authors who introduced these thinkers and ideas to her. Challenge students to write an essay about what and who has influenced them most in their lives. Who are the key people—relatives, friends, philosophers, or writers—who have had an effect on their thinking? How have these people impacted their beliefs?
- Martin read voraciously and widely. Divide students into small groups and give them passages from some of the writings that were most influential for Martin. Ask them to read and discuss these passages and then talk about connections they see to Martin’s artwork and their own lives.
  - John Dewey, “Having an Experience,” in *Art as Experience*
  - The Allegory of the Cave in Plato’s *Republic*  
<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.8.vii.html>
  - D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966) on Zen  
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Interview with Agnes Martin, 1997  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JfYjmo5OA>

TED-Ed's animated video on Plato's Allegory of the Cave  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RWOpQXTItA>

## WEBSITES

Pace Gallery  
<http://www.pacegallery.com/artists/290/agnes-martin>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Benita Eisler, "Life Lines," *New Yorker*, Jan. 25, 1993, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> Tiffany Bell, "Happiness Is the Goal," in *Agnes Martin*, eds. Frances Morris and Bell (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Eisler, "Life Lines," p. 77.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> Joan Simon, "Perfection Is in the Mind: An Interview with Agnes Martin," *Art in America* 84, no. 5 (May 1996): p. 124.

<sup>9</sup> Eisler, "Life Lines," p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> Simon, "Perfection Is in the Mind: An Interview with Agnes Martin," p. 124.

<sup>12</sup> Denise Spranger, "Center of Attention," *Taos News/Tempo Magazine*, Mar. 21–27, 2002, p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22; and Ann Wilson, "Linear Webs: Agnes Martin," *Art and Artists* 1, no. 7 (Oct. 1966): p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Agnes Martin, interview by Suzan Campbell, May 15, 1989, transcript in Archives of American Art, The Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

<sup>15</sup> Lucy R. Lippard, "Homage to the Square," *Art in America* 55, no. 4 (July–Aug. 1967): p. 55.

<sup>16</sup> Frances Morris, "Agnes Martin: Innocence and Experience," in *Agnes Martin*, eds. Morris and Bell, p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> Eisler, "Life Lines," p. 78.

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, "Linear Webs: Agnes Martin," pp. 48–49.

<sup>19</sup> Eisler, "Life Lines," p. 71.

<sup>20</sup> Olivia Laing, "Agnes Martin: The Artist Mystic Who Disappeared into the Desert," *The Guardian*, May 22, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/may/22/agnes-martin-the-artist-mystic-who-disappeared-into-the-desert>.

<sup>21</sup> Wilson, "Linear Webs: Agnes Martin," p. 47.

<sup>22</sup> Kathleen Nugent Mangan, former assistant to Lenore Tawney and currently Executive Director of the Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, in conversation with Frances Morris, July 23, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Teacher Guide for *Robert Indiana: Beyond Love*, Whitney Museum of American Art, <http://whitney.org/Education/ForTeachers/TeacherGuides/RobertIndiana>.

<sup>24</sup> Agnes Martin, "Beauty Is the Mystery of Life" (lecture, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, 1989). Printed in *Agnes Martin*, eds. Morris and Bell, pp. 158–59.

<sup>25</sup> Jacquelyn Baas, "Agnes Martin: Reading for Writings," in *Agnes Martin*, eds. Morris and Bell, p. 224.

<sup>26</sup> Agnes Martin, "The Untroubled Mind," in *Agnes Martin: Writings/Schriften*, ed. Dieter Schwarz (Ostfildern: Cantz, 1991), p. 44.

<sup>27</sup> David J. Clarke, *The Influence of Oriental Thought on Postwar American Painting and Sculpture* (New York and London, 1988), p. 231.

<sup>28</sup> Agnes Martin, "On a Clear Day," Oct. 15, 1975. Printed in *Agnes Martin*, eds. Morris and Bell, p. 124.

<sup>29</sup> Tom Collins, "Agnes Martin Reflects on Art & Life," *Geronimo*, Jan. 1999, p. 13.

(from *Merriam-Webster* unless otherwise noted)

### **ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM**

An artistic movement of the mid-twentieth century comprising diverse styles and techniques and emphasizing an artist's liberty to convey attitudes and emotions through nontraditional and usually nonrepresentational means

### **ADOBE**

A brick or building material of sun-dried earth and straw or a structure made of adobe bricks

### **ASSEMBLAGE**

An artistic composition made from scraps, junk, and odds and ends (as of paper, cloth, wood, stone, or metal)

### **BIOMORPHIC**

Resembling or suggesting the forms of living organisms

### **BUDDHISM**

A religion of eastern and central Asia growing out of the teaching of Gautama Buddha that suffering is inherent in life and that one can be liberated from it by mental and moral self-purification

### **CALVINISM**

The theological system of John Calvin and his followers marked by strong emphasis on the sovereignty of God, the depravity of humankind, and the doctrine of predestination

### **FOUND OBJECT**

A natural or discarded object found by chance and held to have aesthetic value

### **GRID**

A pattern of lines that cross each other to form squares on a piece of paper, a map, etc.

### **NON-OBJECTIVE**

Representing or intended to represent no natural or actual object, figure, or scene

### **POP ART**

Art in which commonplace objects, such as road signs, hamburgers, comic strips, or soup cans, are used as subject matter and are often physically incorporated in the work

### **REGIONALISM**

Emphasis on local or regional characteristics in art or literature

### **SERIES**

A number of things or events of the same class coming one after another in spatial or temporal succession

### **TAOISM**

A Chinese philosophy based on the writings of Lao Tzu in the sixth century BCE that stresses living simply, honestly, and in harmony with nature

### **TRANSCENDENTALISM**

A philosophy which holds that thought and spiritual things are more real than ordinary human experience and material things

### **VEDANTA**

One of the six systems of Indian philosophy  
(from *Brittanica.com*)

### **WARP**

The threads that run up and down on a loom or in a woven fabric

### **WEFT**

The threads that run from side to side on a loom or in a woven fabric