

## Step 4: Interpretation

Interpretation involves bringing together your close observation, analysis, and any additional information you have gathered about a work of art to try to understand what it means.

There can be multiple interpretations of a work of art. The best-informed ones are based on visual evidence and accurate research.

Some interpretive questions to consider for this painting might be:

■ What do you think this artist was trying to express about gas stations in America in 1963?

■ How does this painting call to mind the culture of the 1950s and 1960s?

■ What does this image suggest about the role of gas and gas stations in America today?

## Step 5: Critical Assessment and Response

This final stage involves a judgment of the success of a work of art. Critical assessment deals with questions of value and can include more personal and subjective responses to art. Critical assessment can also change over time.

Overall, do you think this painting is successful and well done? Why or why not?

Do you like it? Does it move you?

Does this image represent issues that are still relevant today? Why or why not?

We hope this approach has enhanced your exploration and enjoyment of this painting. If you like, you can try this method with other works of art. Simply ask yourself with each work:

**What do I see?**  
(Close Observation)

**What do I think?**  
(Analysis)

**How can I learn more?**  
(Research)

**What might it mean?**  
(Interpretation)

**How do I feel about it?**  
(Critical Assessment and Response)

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[hoodmuseum.  
dartmouth.edu](http://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu)

Edward Joseph Ruscha, American, born 1937

***Standard Station,  
Amarillo, Texas***

1963

Oil on canvas

Gift of James Meeker, Class of 1958, in memory of Lee English, Class of 1958, scholar, poet, athlete and friend to all; P.976.281.

The California-based contemporary artist Edward Ruscha has produced paintings, drawings, prints, films, and books that merge remarkable graphic skill with a strong interest in vernacular culture. Like Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and other artists associated with the international Pop Art movement of the 1960s, Ruscha rejected the gestural, painterly modes of abstract expressionism in favor of the dry, impersonal manner of commercial illustration. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Ruscha made frequent road trips between his childhood home in Oklahoma City and his adopted home of Los Angeles. Traveling along U.S. Route 66, Ruscha began taking photographs of the solitary gasoline stations that punctuate the long, desolate stretches of this iconic highway, linking his autobiography with his subject matter for the first time. Ruscha later stated that he had been “awakened” by the movies of John Ford, “especially *Grapes of Wrath* where the poor ‘Okies’ (mostly farmers whose land dried up) go to California with mattresses on their cars rather than stay in Oklahoma and starve.” The photographs that Ruscha took along U.S. Route 66, as a hopeful “Okie” headed west to become an artist, were included in his first book, *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations*. This self-published, pocket-sized volume, which appeared in 1963, had a major influence on attitudes toward the democratic dissemination of art in the form of artist’s books and multiples—a trend linked to Pop Art’s interest in commercial distribution and mass consumption.

In the same year, Ruscha completed this mural-sized painting of the Standard Oil gas station at the corner of Polk Street and North East Eighth Street in Amarillo, Texas. Yellow searchlights scan the night sky, beckoning travelers to this pristine, red-white-and-blue structure bathed in fluorescent light. The searchlights are the artist’s invention, lifted from the logo of Twentieth-Century Fox, which he had earlier incorporated into his 1962 painting *Large Trademark with Eight Spotlights*. In both works, the company logo is dramatically rendered as an architectural structure that takes the form of a diagonal wedge, dividing the canvas in two through an exaggerated, plunging perspective. The attention to detail found in the precise lines, angles, and lettering reflects Ruscha’s recent work in an advertising agency, which also encouraged his interest in subject matter like signs, trademarks, and gas stations that had previously been considered too generic or mundane for oil painting. As the artist wryly explained, “I don’t have any Seine River like Monet. I just have U.S. 66 between Oklahoma and Los Angeles.”

*Standard Station, Amarillo, Texas* helped to define both Pop Art and the modern American landscape in the 1960s. Its monumental scale, horizontal format, and roadside subject matter quickly led art critics to suggest that Ruscha had identified the canvas with a car windshield or a highway billboard. However, the reference to the Fox searchlights signals that the artist may also have had in mind Hollywood’s panoramic screen portrayals of the open road and its promise of freedom and adventure, as well as loneliness and the broken dreams of the *Grapes of Wrath*. The painting also seems to represent a prophetic statement about American dependence on gasoline oil, as well as a delightful pun on the medium of choice for painters since the fifteenth century.

# A Closer Look



**HOOD MUSEUM OF ART  
DARTMOUTH COLLEGE**



# A Closer Look

The Hood Museum of Art is a teaching museum. Our mission is to create an ideal learning environment that fosters transformative encounters with works of art. One way we do this is through a method called **Learning to Look**. This five-step approach to exploring works of art is designed to empower visitors to observe carefully and think critically about any work of art.

Simply follow the steps below to practice this technique.

## Step 1: Close Observation

Look carefully at this painting.

What do you see?



What do you notice about the gas station?



The sign?

The sky?



What do you notice about the composition (the way in which the objects are arranged in this painting)?

Name the shapes. Describe the lines. List the colors.



How would you describe the artist's style? How has he applied the paint? Can you see any brushstrokes?

## Step 2: Analysis

Now think about all of this visual information.

Where do you think this gas station is located? Why?

What time period do you think this is?

What time of day is it?

What seems to be missing from this painting?

Where would you need to be in order to see this scene from this point of view?

What effect do all of the diagonal lines have on how you see this painting? How would it be different if you saw this gas station straight on and it was made up of horizontal and vertical lines instead?

Does this painting remind you of other types of images?

As you consider each of these questions, look to the painting for clues to support your ideas.

## Step 3: Research

Now that you have had a chance to look carefully and begin forming your own ideas about this work of art, feel free to read the text printed on the back of this brochure. It provides information you cannot get simply by looking at the painting.

When you have finished reading, consider the following:

Does this information reinforce what you observed and deduced on your own?

Did the text mention anything you did not see or think about previously? If so, what?

How would your experience of this painting have been different if you read the background information first?