Due to copyright restriction, we are no longer able to show an image of Frank Stella’s *Chocorua IV* as part of this online resource. However, images of *Chocorua IV* may be found online.

This resource will allow you to lead your students through careful observation and analysis of a painting by Frank Stella. It is based on the **Learning to Look** method created by the Hood Museum of Art. This discussion-based approach will introduce you and your students to the five steps involved in exploring a work of art: careful observation, analysis, research, interpretation, and critique.

Frank Stella, American, born 1936  
**CHOCORUA IV**  
Fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paints on canvas, 1966  
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College; Purchased through the Miriam and Sidney Stoneman Acquisition Fund, a gift from Judson and Carol Bemis, Class of 1976, and gifts from the Lathrop Fellows, in honor of Brian Kennedy, Director of the Hood Museum of Art, 2005-2010.  
© 2010 Frank Stella/ Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo by Steven Sloman

How to use this resource:

- Print out this document for yourself.
- Read through it carefully as you look at the image of the work of art.
- When you are ready to engage your class, project the image of the work of art on a screen in your classroom using an LCD projector. Use the questions provided below to lead the discussion.

There is no substitute for seeing the real thing!  
Please visit the Hood Museum of Art to see a wide range of original works of art from around the world. There is no charge for admission, and the museum is open every day of the week except Monday. Free tours for K–12 school groups and programs for adults, teens, and families are available.  
Visit the museum's Web site to learn more.
Step 1. Close Observation
Ask students to look carefully at this work of art and describe everything they see. Start with broad, open-ended questions like these:

What do you notice when you look at this image?
What else do you see?

Become more and more specific as you guide your students’ eyes around the work with questions like these:

What shapes do you see?
Describe them.

Are the shapes hard-edged or soft?
Is there any space between them?

How are the shapes arranged?

What colors do you see?
Are they bright? dark? dull? shiny?

How would you describe this composition?
Is it symmetrical? asymmetrical?
stable? moving? flat? three-dimensional?

This work is made up of a single canvas. Trace your finger around the outer edge of the work. How is this painting different from other paintings you have seen?

Step 2. Preliminary Analysis
Once your students have listed everything they noticed about this painting, begin asking simple analytical questions that will deepen your students’ understanding of the work. For instance:

How are the shapes interacting in this work? Are they layered over one another or are they pushing into one another? Is there any movement here?

What effect do the colors have on the work? Do some shapes recede while others project? Is the overall effect flat or three-dimensional? A little of both?

Do the shapes remind you of anything in nature?

What do you think this artist is interested in?
Step 3. Research
At the end of this document, you will find some background information on this painting. Read or paraphrase it for your students.

Step 4. Interpretation
Interpretation involves bringing your close observation, preliminary analysis, and any additional information you have gathered about an art object together to try to understand what a work of art means. There are often no absolute right or wrong answers when one is interpreting a work of art, but there are more thoughtful and better informed ones. It is important to challenge your students to defend their interpretations based upon their visual analysis and research.

Some basic interpretation questions for this painting might include the following:

Compare Chocorua IV with Chocorua I, II, and III. (Images of the other three paintings in this series may be available online.) What effect does changing the color have on these works? Why do you think Frank Stella wanted to work in series?

How are these paintings like traditional paintings? How are they different?

How are they like sculpture? How are they different?

Stella was deeply interested in abstraction (an art that is not consciously representational but rather made up of lines, shapes, and colors) and removing any illusion of three-dimensionality in his painting.

Are these paintings purely abstract? Why or why not?

Are they fully flat or are they still somewhat three-dimensional? Why?

What new ideas do you think Frank Stella’s irregular polygons contributed to the world of art?
5. Critical Assessment and Response
Critical assessment and response involves a judgment about the success of a work of art. It is optional but should always follow the first four stages of the *Learning to Look* method. Art critics often engage in this further analysis and support their opinions based on careful study of and research about a work of art.

Critical assessment involves questions of value. For instance:

*Do you think this irregular polygon painting is successful and well done? Why or why not?*

This fifth stage can also encompass one’s **response** to a work of art.

*Do you like these works of art? Do they move you?*

*Are the ideas Frank Stella was exploring in these paintings still relevant today?*

One’s response can be much more personal and subjective than one’s assessment.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Frank Stella, American, born 1936

*Chocorua IV*
Fluorescent alkyd and epoxy paints on canvas
1966
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College; Purchased through the Miriam and Sidney Stoneman Acquisition Fund, a gift from Judson and Carol Bemis, Class of 1976, and gifts from the Lathrop Fellows, in honor of Brian Kennedy, Director of the Hood Museum of Art, 2005-2010. © 2010 Frank Stella/ Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York
Photo by Steven Sloman

Frank Stella has had a long and prolific career at the forefront of abstract art. A consistent innovator who prefers to produce works in series, he has immersed himself in visual thinking and creating, according to certain key artistic principles: “Line, plane, volume and point, within space.”

The *Irregular Polygons* series of 1965–66 is startlingly dramatic and original. (A polygon is a flat shape bounded by straight lines. An irregular polygon is made up of uneven sides and angles.) Although based on simple geometries, these paintings comprise one of the most complex artistic statements of Stella’s career. The artist created eleven compositions, combining varying numbers of shapes to create daringly irregular outlines. There are four versions of each composition, each with a different color combination. The *Irregular Polygons* marked a radical shift from Stella’s earlier striped paintings in their use of large fields of color. These asymmetric canvases play with illusion and explore space and volume in both painting and sculpture.

*Chocorua* is perhaps the most direct of Stella’s irregular polygon compositions. He observes: “Some things are more immediately successful; some things work better than others.” The central themes of *Chocorua* is the interpenetration of an equilateral triangle and a square, and the interlocking or abutting of shapes. The illusion of depth is caused mainly by the different values of the colors, because although the shapes abut or impinge upon each other, they do not overlap. The *Irregular Polygons* are two-dimensional, but as Stella explains: “There’s a very shallow type of illusion going on in *Chocorua*. . . once you’re committed to doing this in three dimensions, then it really would be a pyramid inside a cube.” The lightning-like band that cushions the triangle reinforces the larger area’s ability to contain the triangle, rather than make the area appear to be seeking to eject it.

Stella associates the triangle in *Chocorua* with “the big mountain”—Mount Chocorua in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. When he began working on the *Irregular Polygons*, he found that “they were so immediately landscape and mountainous” that he decided to name them after places he had visited with his father during his boyhood. This implies that Stella’s painting titles are not always as arbitrary as he has often claimed but instead have personal associations with people, landscapes, and places he has visited.

**Images of Frank Stella’s Chocorua series may be found online.**