

DECODING DECO

Activity Three Lesson Plan

Purpose

- Encourage participants to thoughtfully reflect on their own photographs and artistic choices
- Build critical observation skills by identifying Art Deco elements in peer work
- Practice giving and receiving constructive feedback in a respectful and supportive setting
- Strengthen visual storytelling by considering composition, light, and design details

Implementation Notes

This lesson should take place after “Documenting Deco,” once participants have created photographs to share. Instructors should ask participants to select 1–2 of their best images in advance and prepare them either as digital files for projection or as printed copies for display. At the start of the session, review critique guidelines and model how to give constructive, respectful feedback. Organize the critique so each participant presents at least one photo, receives peer responses, and has time to reflect. Instructors should guide discussion to ensure balance, inclusivity, and productivity, closing with a short, written reflection from participants on what they learned..

Background Knowledge and Materials

The critique process is a central part of learning in the arts. It provides participants with the opportunity to practice close observation, reflect on their own creative choices, and learn from the perspectives of others. In the context of Decoding Deco, critique helps participants develop a stronger understanding of how Art Deco elements—such as geometry, symmetry, line, and decorative detail—can be emphasized through photography. By engaging in structured feedback, students strengthen both their technical skills and their ability to communicate ideas about visual storytelling.

Basic materials may include printed participant photos, poster board, cork boards, magnets, or tape for display, as well as pens and paper for note-taking and reflection. For digital critiques, ensure access to a projector, screen, or online collaboration tool.

Instruction Notes

Begin by reviewing the critique guidelines with participants, highlighting the use of “I notice...” and “I wonder...” statements. Display the selected photos and have each participant present one image with a short explanation, followed by peer feedback. Facilitate the discussion by prompting observations on composition, lighting, and Art Deco details, and ensure everyone participates. Conclude with a whole-group reflection or a short, written takeaway on what was learned.

If time allows, close the session with a short whole-group reflection or ask a few volunteers to share what they learned from the critique. Encourage participants to record a takeaway in writing before leaving the session.

Adaptation Notes

- This lesson can be adapted for both in-person and virtual settings. For in-person sessions, printed photographs allow for physical display and movement around the room. If printing is not possible, images can be projected digitally. For virtual sessions, an online platform can be used for sharing and critique.
- In-person: Display printed photos on poster board, cork boards, or tables for walk-around viewing.
- Digital/in-person: Project images in a slide deck or from a shared folder.
- Virtual: Use online tools such as Google Slides, Padlet, or a class folder for uploads and group discussion.
- Group size: Small groups allow deeper feedback for each participant; large groups may focus on one image per participant.

Presentation Steps

Warm-Up

Begin with a quick discussion by asking participants what they noticed while photographing Art Deco buildings or details. After this warm-up, show two or three iconic Art Deco photographs and invite the class to consider what makes each image effective. Guide the conversation toward ideas of composition, the use of light and shadow, and the choice of subject.

Instruction

Establish the parameters for the assignment by explaining that participants will be sharing and discussing the photographs they created during Documenting Deco. Review the critique guidelines and then display the selected images. Each participant should present one photograph with a brief explanation, followed by peer feedback. Guide the discussion toward composition, lighting, and Art Deco details, ensuring everyone takes part. Conclude with a brief group reflection or written takeaway on what students learned from the critique.

Activity

Students begin by selecting one or two photographs from their shoot that they feel best represent Art Deco. Before starting, the instructor should briefly review the critique guidelines, reminding students to be specific in their feedback, to remain respectful, and to use “I notice...” and “I wonder...” statements. Each student’s chosen photo is then displayed, either on screen or as a print, and the student offers a short explanation of their choice. Peers respond with observations about composition, line, light, and detail, ask questions about artistic decisions, and suggest possible improvements. Throughout the process, the instructor facilitates discussion to ensure that feedback remains constructive, balanced, and inclusive.

Wrap-Up

After the critique, bring the group together for a short discussion about what they learned from seeing one another’s work and hearing different perspectives. Ask participants to write a brief reflection identifying one strength in their own photography and one area they would like to improve. Conclude with closing comments that highlight themes from the session—such as strong use of geometry, interesting lighting choices, or opportunities to explore new angles—and encourage participants to carry these insights into their next photographs.

Materials

Instructor materials available at ArtDeco.org/Learn:

- Participant photographs (printed or digital)
- Critique guidelines handout
- Paper and pens for reflections



APPENDIX A

Decoding Deco: Critique Guidelines

Critique is an important part of learning in the arts. It helps us reflect on our own work, see new possibilities through others' perspectives, and strengthen our skills as photographers. Use the following guidelines to share feedback in a respectful, constructive, and thoughtful way.

Guidelines

- Be specific: Explain what you notice about composition, lighting, or subject matter.
- Be respectful: Focus on the work, not the person.
- Balance your feedback: Point out strengths as well as areas for improvement.
- Use 'I notice...' to describe observations.
- Use 'I wonder...' to ask questions or invite reflection.

Helpful Prompts

- I notice...
- I wonder...
- One thing that works really well in this photo is...
- One suggestion I have is...

Reflection Questions

- What is one strength in your work?
- What is one thing you want to improve after today's critique?
- How did someone else's photo inspire you to think differently about your own work?