AN ARTS CURRICULUM GUIDE:
WHAT CAN THE HIGH LINE TEACH US ABOUT THE MACHINE AESTHETIC?

Grades 4 and 5

Materials:

Period 1:

- PowerPoint presentation
- Paper
- Pencil

Period 2:

- Watercolor paint
- Watercolor paper

LESSON GOALS

Students will:

- Learn that the High Line was built in the 1930s to carry freight along Manhattan's west side
- Learn that the High Line is now open as a public park
- Be introduced to the term Machine Age
  - Learn why the early decades of the 20th century was called the Machine Age
- Be introduced to the term machine aesthetic
- Learn the characteristics of the machine aesthetic
  - Repetition
  - Horizontality
  - Lack of ornament
  - Simple, "pure" forms
  - Mass-produced materials, e.g., concrete, metal, glass
- Learn the role design plays in functional objects
- Make observations about the High Line's design
- Design a railing for the High Line, using some of the ideas of the machine aesthetic

Duration: 2 periods

Period 1—PowerPoint presentation with exploration of the machine aesthetic; students make preliminary sketches for a new railing for the High Line

Period 2—students further develop their sketches into watercolor paintings

PERIOD 1:

Ask students, 'What is a machine?' Generate a list of machines that students use. Items may run the gamut from iPods, to computers, to cell phones, television, to cars, to washing machines, to blenders, etc. Ask students if machines have always existed (they have, but were not always powered by electricity or another energy source.) Explain that before electricity and gas, there were machines, but they were powered by other sources of energy. Ask if students can think of other sources of energy. (Answers might include wind, the water, people, or animals such as oxen.) Ask students if they can think of machines long ago that might have been powered by the wind or water or people or animals. (Answers might include windmills, watermills, sawmills, a pedal-driven sewing machine, etc. Ask students if they know when electricity came into use. (By the 1880s, electricity was coming into common use, although even though it was available, there were many households that did not have electricity until the 20th century.) Ask students to think about how people's lives might have changed when electricity came along. (Answers will vary.) Explain that once electricity and oil came along, inventors were able to create all types of machines that helped in daily life, provided entertainment, enabled people to travel greater distances, etc. Brainstorm examples of machines that might have come into being about 100 years ago. Students might mention the telephone, radio, cars, planes, movies, phonographs, etc. Explain that in the first decades of the 20th century, there were so many machines being invented that people began to call that time period the "Machine Age." What does this name mean to students? Does it mean machines were important? Does it mean machines were becoming more and more common? (Yes.)

Explain to students that people loved all the new machines, especially because they were so modern and enabled people to do things they hadn't done before. Machines enabled people to go faster. They made work easier. Designers began designing machines and other objects in a way that they would communicate these ideas of speed and function.

Set up PowerPoint presentation.

Slide 1: Iron.

Have students identify the object. Ask if it is something that they would think of as "designed," or if somebody made an effort to make it attractive. (Answers will vary.) Remind students that it is a strictly utilitarian object, but one that has been designed according to the ideas of the machine aesthetic. Ask students to respond to the image. How does the iron look to them? Of what material is it made? What are some of the elements of the design?

Slide 2: Pioneer Zephyr train.

Tell students that this train was built in 1934 and that it embodies many of the ideas of the machine aesthetic. Does this train look like it will get you where you are going quickly or slowly? (Quickly.) Is a train engine heavy or light? (It is very heavy!) But the way it is designed makes it seem light. Elicit ideas about the shape and design that makes you think of speed. Why would a train designer want to design this engine to make it look fast?

Slide 3: Clock.
Ask students if this clock is tall or short? (It is short.) Remind students that in the Machine Age, everybody wanted everything to be fast. Explain that many Machine Age objects are very short, or horizontal. Why do they think so? (Answers might include the idea that something low conveys speed and moving forward.)

Slide 4: Microphone.
Have students identify the object. Ask if it has a lot of decoration on it? (No, none.) Why not? Elicit that an idea of the Machine Age was that the object should express its use, and that extra decoration was not necessary. Machine Age objects had little extra decoration or ornament.

Slide 5: Record player.
Remind students that before the age of iPods and CDs, people listened to music on records. In order to listen to the record, they had to have a record player. This record player would open from the top, and the turntable is inside the cabinet. Ask students if they think the shapes in this record player are complicated or simple. (They are simple.) This is another aspect of the machine aesthetic. What are the shapes that the students can identify?

Slide 6: The High Line.
Ask students if they are familiar with the High Line. Some may be, and others may not be. Explain that it is an elevated train line that was built to carry cargo on the west side of Manhattan. What is cargo? Make sure students understand the difference between a train that carries cargo and one that carries people. They stopped using it in the 1980s, about 25 years ago, and now it is being turned into a park. (It was built in 1934 as part of a program called the West Side Improvement to ameliorate heavy shipping traffic on Manhattan's west side. At that time, the west side of Manhattan was NY's center of freight traffic—ship, train, and truck—and the streets were clogged with all manner of conveyance. Freight trains actually ran at grade along portions of 10th, 11th, and 12th avenues, and were a public nuisance as well as safety hazard. The High Line was built to get the freight trains off of the streets. It begins at 34th Street and runs to Gansevoort Street (a southern portion was previously demolished) between 10th and 11th Avenues. By 1980, the High Line had become defunct, and it sat idle for more than 20 years. In the late 1990s, threatened with demolition, a grass-roots organization, Friends of the High Line [FHL], formed to preserve this important piece of New York's industrial history. FHL was successful in saving the structure and it is now open as a public park. FHL now serves as a conservancy, raising funds and operating the park in a partnership with the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation.)

Tell students that an elevated train line like this is called a viaduct. Have they traveled on any throughout the city? (Some subway lines are elevated in parts of the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, and one small area of Manhattan.) These elevated subway lines are examples of viaducts. Are these viaducts fancy items or are they mainly designed to be used by many people? (They are designed for heavy use.) So since this viaduct is utilitarian (you may discuss the meaning of this word), would they expect it to have any decorated parts? (Answers will vary.)

Slide 7, The High Line railing detail:
Ask students the answer to the question. Does the High Line, a very rugged, utilitarian structure have any decoration? (It does.) Elicit, though, that this design is very simple, and very much in line with the ideas of the Machine Age. Discuss some of the ideas already discussed and elicit how the design reflects this idea. Horizontality, speed, simple shapes can all be seen in the design of the railing. Ask if the students if they notice any repeating patterns? (Yes.) This is also an idea of the machine aesthetic. What material is the High Line made of? (It is steel and concrete, although in this slide you can only see the steel.) Why would these materials be chosen? Would it make sense to build the High Line of wood or plastic? Why or why not?

Slide 8, High Line railing detail:
Ask students to respond to the railing design. What are some adjectives that students can use to describe the railing?

Tell students that they are going to design a new railing for the High Line. Distribute paper and pencils. Tell students that they should think about a design that will use repetition and simple shapes. Before students begin, brainstorm ideas to get them started in their design. What are shapes that they can use? What are some patterns of repetition that they can think of? Will they use many shapes, or a few?

Developing the Design Further

PERIOD 2:
Students will take their pencil sketches and develop them further into a watercolor painting. When displaying the students' work, you may include the image of the High Line railing, since that was the source of inspiration.