



# *The Rock*

1944–1948

by Peter Blume

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Department of Museum Education

Division of Student and Teacher Programs

The Elizabeth Stone Robson Teacher Resource Center

ART  
INSTITUTE  
CHICAGO

# Peter Blume (American, born Russia, present-day Belarus, 1906–1992)

## *The Rock*, 1944–1948

Oil on canvas

57 5/8 x 74 3/8 in. (146.4 x 188.9 cm)

Gift of Edgar Kaufman, Jr., 1956.338

At the center of this painting looms a monumental rock—scarred, blasted, yet enduring. Precariously perched on a natural pedestal of soil and stone, the rock serves as the **fulcrum** of the composition, giving it balance and symmetry. A scene fraught with destruction and bustling human activity encircles the rock. Men and women of different ages and races work together to bring order to the chaotic landscape. On the left, a group of workers constructs a modern building using simple tools and methods. On the right, two men—one old, the other young—strain to bring order to a smoldering ruin. This bizarre combination of devastation and reconstruction provokes the viewer to question both the causes for such destruction as well as the goal of these men and women's efforts. According to the artist, Peter Blume, *The Rock* symbolizes “the continual process of man's rebuilding out of a devastated world.” The complexity and dense imagery of this work, however, are open to several interpretations. Peter Blume's *The Rock* is indebted to the political, social, and artistic currents of the time as well as the artist's own personal vision.

At the age of five, Blume and his family emigrated from Russia to Brooklyn, New York. While still in grammar school, he enrolled in evening art classes and later began attending fine arts classes at the Art Students League and the National Academy of Design. Like many other young artists in New York of the 1920s, Blume was forced to take odd jobs in order to support himself as a painter. After working as a jewelry manufacturer, newsstand attendant, and elevator operator, he finally received recognition as an artist from a prestigious New York gallery. Shortly thereafter, his painting *South of Scranton* won the highest prize at the 1934 Carnegie International Exhibition of Paintings in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At 28, Blume was the youngest artist to win this prize. During the **Great Depression** (1929–1940), Blume was one of the 10,000 artists employed under the **Federal Art Project** (FAP; 1935–1943), an agency of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's **New Deal**. This agency marked the first time in American history that the arts were funded on a large scale by the federal government. Blume was one of the artists chosen to paint murals for post offices and other federal buildings. It was during his tenure as an FAP artist that he began developing his individual artistic style.

Blume became familiar with many modern art styles during his travels through Europe and through his affiliations with **émigré** artists who

fled to the United States during the rise of **fascism** in the 1930s. He was particularly influenced by the style and philosophy of **Surrealism**, an artistic movement that developed in France in the early 1920s, typified by dream-like images and seemingly nonsensical subjects. These themes were greatly indebted to psychological theories of the unconscious and revolutionary politics of the early 20th century. Inspired by Surrealism, Blume developed a repertoire of fantastical subjects and caricatured human forms in his paintings. He used his painting to criticize the rise of fascism in Europe and to comment on the ills of capitalism in modern society. He repeatedly used themes of death and rebirth, in particular, as the foundation for this type of social commentary. In addition, Blume continually painted and sketched scenes from nature including rock formations, marine life, and plant life; these laborious sketching techniques contributed to the density and complexity of his works. *The Rock* brings Blume's interests in social commentary and nature together as a dynamic whole and highlights his vast array of rich visual symbols.

Blume finished *The Rock* in 1948, three years after the end of World War II (1939–1945). The war, including the atomic bombing of **Hiroshima** and **Nagasaki**, illustrated the catastrophic effects of technology on the earth and its inhabitants. The devastation of the recent war was likely foremost on visitors' minds when the painting was first shown in Pittsburgh in 1950. As the center of the composition and the inspiration for the painting's title, the rock may be Blume's powerful symbol of humankind's tenacity and survival in the face of such destruction or, perhaps, the endurance of the earth itself, despite the catastrophic wars humans cause. The men and woman, with cartoon-like faces, struggle as if in a stupor to go on living and working in a nightmare created by the irrational use of technology.

The deliberate balance of imagery in the composition alludes to both decay and rebirth, making the painting a metaphor for the destruction of the war and the reconstruction of the world that followed. A skeleton, for instance, lies near green **lichen** and a scarlet fungus, perhaps referring to the persistence of life amidst death. Smoke drifts toward a building under construction, linking symbols of destruction and renewal. The destroyed buildings allude to the bombed ruins of London left after the World War II **Blitzkrieg** in 1940. All that remains of those who once lived there are an empty rocking chair and the oval portrait on the shattered wall.

In the lower right-hand corner of the painting, a red Coca-Cola sign, torn from its original location, lies purposelessly amidst the broken bottles and burning remains of this ravaged, old-fashioned home. In contrast, a new building surrounded by scaffolding is on the rise as humans work together to create it. With its **cantilevered** terraces of limestone, the structure alludes to **Falling Water**, a house designed by **Frank Lloyd Wright** (1867–1959) and completed in 1935 in Bear Run, Pennsylvania. Falling Water is one of the most spectacular architectural achievements of this century, designed for the Pittsburgh department store magnate Edgar Kaufman, who also commissioned *The Rock* from Peter Blume. During a visit to Falling Water in 1938, Blume completed many sketches intended as preliminary drawings for the background of a family portrait commissioned by Kaufman. Blume never completed the Kaufman family portrait, yet Falling Water makes an appearance in *The Rock* as a symbol of modern innovation and the hopeful rebuilding of a destroyed landscape. Interestingly, the construction workers use only simple tools such as hammers, chisels, wheelbarrows, and a basic pulley system to erect this modern design. On one hand, Blume's imagery indicates a distrust of modern technology, yet the collaborative effort of the workers, the blooming plants, and the fast-rising architectural monument seem to suggest that there is hope for the future.

# Glossary

**Blitzkrieg:** German term (meaning “lightning war”) used to signify any swift, concentrated military offensive; it is most often applied to the massive bombing of London by German planes in September 1940.

**cantilevered:** describes a beam or terrace that projects an the architectural structure, seemingly hovering in the air

**émigré:** person who leaves his or her native country to reside in another country; especially one who leaves the country during a period of political unrest

**Falling Water:** home designed in 1935 by architect Frank Lloyd Wright for the Kaufman family in Bear Run, Pennsylvania

**fascism:** system of government that advocates a dictatorship of the extreme right. This system of government often includes the merging of business and state leadership with a narrow-minded nationalism.

**Federal Art Project (FAP):** New Deal project to provide employment initiated in 1935 by the United States government and lasting until 1943. This agency commissioned unemployed artists, writers, and musicians to produce public works of art during the Great Depression

**fulcrum:** the point around which a lever rotates; something that serves as a hinge or support

**Great Depression:** period of drastic economic decline following the stock market crash of October 1929 and continuing until 1940. It was characterized by decreasing business activity and high rates of unemployment.

**Hiroshima:** city in Japan destroyed on August 6, 1945 by the first atomic bomb employed in warfare by the United States

**lichen:** type of plant made up of algae and fungus usually found growing on a rock or another solid surface

**Nagasaki:** seaport city in Japan and the target of the U.S. atomic bomb dropped on August 9, 1945; the bombs resulted in the surrender of the Japanese and the end of World War II

**New Deal:** programs and policies for economic relief, reform, and recovery introduced by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his administration between 1933 and 1940

**Surrealism:** modern literary and artistic movement that began in France in 1924 and flourished in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s. The movement stressed the radical transformation of existing social conditions and values through the liberation of the unconscious mind. Surrealist art is characterized by its bizarre, dream-like, and sometimes non-representational imagery.

**Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959):** American architect as well as an important designer and theorist. Wright is best known for his Prairie School designs at the turn of the century.

## Classroom Activities and Discussion Questions

### • Last Night I Had the Strangest Dream...

With its vivid, eerie colors and juxtaposition of unrelated objects, *The Rock* is somewhat like a dream. Assign a creative writing exercise in which students imagine and describe a dream that includes the scene represented in the painting. What happened prior to this scene to cause such destruction? Ask students to concentrate on their sensory experiences of the painting. What do they see? feel? taste? smell? hear?

### • A Rock Study Guide

Use this painting as the starting point for a unit on rocks. Ask students to develop a chart containing the following information: What are the three main rock families? What are their physical properties? Where are they found? What are their uses? Have students include a small illustration of each rock type. You may want to conduct a short walking trip around the school neighborhood to collect rock samples.

After finishing their rock study guide, have students look at the representations of rocks in Peter Blume’s painting. Would this rock fit into a particular category? How many different types of stones or rocks can you identify in this image? Do you think Peter Blume attempted to realistically represent particular types of rocks? Why or why not?

Name (Scientific Name)	Formation Cycle	Physical Properties	Location	Uses	Illustration
<i>Igneous</i>					
<i>Sedimentary</i>					
<i>Metamorphic</i>					

- **Home Sweet Home**

This painting includes two representations of architectural styles. On the left-hand side, we see Falling Water, Frank Lloyd Wright's revolutionary design for Edgar Kaufman, under construction. On the right-hand side is a more traditional brick-style family home of the early 20th century that has been partially destroyed. Use these two types of living spaces as starting points for a brief unit on architecture. Have students collect pictures of different types of residences from around the world and throughout history. These can be images from books, magazines, photos, or drawings. A walk around the school's neighborhood also might provide examples of various styles. After students have collected a large and diverse archive of images, create a visual timeline of residential architecture. Finally, ask students to design a home for the future. How will the structure accommodate the residents' wants, needs, and the home's geographic location? To further expand this exercise, have students draw floor plans and models to scale of their homes.

- **Tools of the Trade**

Have students identify the tools that are being used by the people in this picture. Were these the typical tools used in the mid-1940s? Are these the same tools that we might employ in a present-day construction site? Compare them to construction tools and procedures used for the ancient Egyptian pyramids (David MacCauley's 1975 *Pyramid* is a good resource book for students). Why do you think Peter Blume avoided using modern technology in this work?

- **Help Wanted**

Have students write a "Help Wanted" ad for this construction site. What qualifications would prospective employees have to possess? What personal traits would be useful in this working environment? Have students read employment ads from your local newspaper to familiarize themselves with the current style and terms. As a follow-up activity, have students write a letter of application for this job.

- **My Life as a Rock**

Write a story from the point of view of the rock. How does it feel? What does it see from where it is situated? How did it become so fragmented and scarred? What are its future goals?

- **The Rock in Context**

For older students, use this painting as a starting point for a discussion about the effects of war, particularly World War II. Peter Blume's *The Rock* alludes to the massive destruction of cities and towns during World War II, particularly the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Blitzkrieg in London. You may want to compare this painting to other images and films from the same year and/or literary or documentary texts from this period. Some suggestions: John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, Rumer Godden's *Episode of Sparrows*, or Edward Hopper's painting *Nighthawks*?

Peter Blume, *The Rock*, 1944–1948.

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