

## BECOMING MODERN

### America in the 1920s—Theme I: “The Age”—Collection Discussion Guide

To offer a unique perspective on the Twenties, six collections of primary materials, each from a single source—newsreels, cartoons, political cartoons, animated cartoons, subway posters, and a 1931 retrospective—are presented in Theme I: THE AGE. They provide snapshots of a brief but defining period in American history—perhaps the first that seems immediately recognizable to us in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. We encourage you to mix and match materials from two or more collections in this Theme to gain insights that such snapshot views offer. (See chart, p. 2).

- ❑ What perspective on the 1920s is offered in each collection?
- ❑ How does each collection display prevalent attitudes of the Twenties? How does each reveal America “becoming modern” or resisting modernity?
- ❑ Determine the purpose of each collection or genre—to inform, persuade, advertise, analyze, entertain, etc., or a combination?
- ❑ How does genre affect message? How does an audience’s expectations of a genre influence its response?
- ❑ To pursue this question, explore how an issue is presented in different genres. What can you learn, for example, about attitudes toward Prohibition by comparing a humor cartoon, a political cartoon, and an animated cartoon? What different perspectives on the woes of automobile traffic are evident in a newsreel, subway poster, humor cartoon, and political cartoon? How are aviation innovations portrayed in cartoons and in newsreels? (See chart, p. 2.)
- ❑ Select one item from a collection and reconfigure its message—its “take” on an issue—in a different genre. Choose a *New Yorker* cartoon on consumerism, for example, and decide how its point would be delivered in a brief newsreel segment. What footage and intertitle text would convey a similar message? How would the message be changed by the inherent differences in the genres?
- ❑ Based on the evidence in the collections, how are the Twenties immediately familiar to 21<sup>st</sup>-century observers? In what ways does the decade seem remote and old-fashioned?
- ❑ Identify and explain four characteristics of the Twenties that most differentiate the decade from the 1910s and the 1930s.
- ❑ What are benefits and downsides of snapshot views of a historical period?
- ❑ What research would you conduct to test a hypothesis about the 1920s gained from these snapshot views?



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## Becoming Modern: America in the 1920s—Theme I: “The Age”

[Section One presents contemporary commentary on “the Age” as an introduction to the period.]

Section		2	3	4	5	6	7
Topic	Number of items	Historical Retrospectives: <i>Only Yesterday</i> (year-by-year excerpts)	Political Cartoons: <i>Chicago Tribune</i> (24: two per year)	Cartoons: <i>New Yorker</i> (13)	Animated cartoons: <i>Felix the Cat</i> (8)	Newsreels: <i>Detroit News Pictorial</i> (30)	Advertising Posters: <i>New York City Subway Posters</i> (20)
Automobile / Traffic	14	✓	✓	✓✓		✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Youth / Children	12		✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓✓✓
Aviation	9		✓	✓	✓	✓✓✓✓✓	✓
The City	9		✓	✓✓		✓✓✓✓	✓✓
Prohibition	6	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓		
Labor Strikes, Racial Unrest	6		✓✓	✓	✓		✓✓
Presidents / Campaigns	6	✓✓	✓✓✓				✓
Immigration/ Americanism	6		✓✓✓		✓	✓	✓
End of WWI	5	✓✓	✓✓				✓
African Americans	5		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Foreign Affairs/ Defense	5		✓✓✓			✓	✓
Stock Market / The Crash	5	✓	✓	✓✓			✓
“The Age”	4		✓✓✓	✓			
Business/ Consumerism	4	✓	✓	✓✓			
Women	4		✓	✓		✓	✓
Movies / Stars	4				✓✓	✓✓	
Lindbergh	3		✓		✓	✓	
Radio	3	✓		✓		✓	
City / Country	2		✓				✓
Ku Klux Klan	2		✓	✓			
“Normalcy”	2	✓	✓				
Evolution	2			✓	✓		