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 21st-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 21st-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?
### Becoming Modern: America in the 1920s—Theme I: “The Age”

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

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