This course investigates twentieth-century modernism as it developed in the art and visual cultures of Africa and the African diaspora. Themes and case studies may include the introduction of traditional African arts into modernist discourse; the image of Africa in the Harlem Renaissance; the African diaspora in Paris between the wars; the influence of African-American culture on developments in pre- and post-independence African nations; the function of portraiture in establishing identity; artists’ contributions to and representations of battles for civil rights or national independence; and the role of museums, publications, and educational institutions in framing the visual arts of Africa and the African diaspora. The course seeks to trace a few of the many currents of inspiration and exchange between modern artists in Africa, Europe, and the Americas, in order to reframe and transform historical narratives that represent modernism as a primarily Euro-American development. We will focus, in particular, on the ways in which modernist aesthetics and rhetoric were deployed by artists throughout the Black Atlantic to establish control of the powerful tools of representation, and the ways in which their efforts contributed to, challenged, and transformed international modernism.

Course open to students from all departments.

Images: (top) Erhabor Emokpae, The Battle Between Life and Death, Nigeria, 1962; (right) Elizabeth Catlett, Homage to My Young Black Sisters, USA, 1968