The Art: What’s Going on Here?
Warren Colescott’s print Death in Venice: Pursuit is starkly divided into three bands of color. The top third of the print is dominated by red and pink while a slash of yellow covers the middle third. The bottom is grounded by dark blues and greens. This arrangement creates a sharp division between the top and bottom halves of the print and results in what seems to be two different depictions of Venice. In the top half an older, balding gentleman with attenuated, disjointed limbs appears to run across a wavering cityscape. The architecture is recognizably Venetian, with leaning gothic-style palaces on the left-hand side and a church that bears a noticeable resemblance to San Giorgio Maggiore—due to its “temple-front” appearance with columns and a triangular pediment—on the right. Set in front of a background of a mix of reds and pinks, the figure—Gustav von Aschenbach, the lead character in Death in Venice—engages in his frenzied pursuit of the youthful Tadzio.

Venice as a city, referenced by the distinctly Venetian architecture at the top of the print, is one of the most popular destinations in the world, with more than 20 million visitors each year. The city, precariously built on islands in a lagoon, is also famously sinking. By depicting modern tourists (their clothing is clearly not from 1912, when Death in Venice was written and set), Colescott is perhaps commenting on how the tourist industry sustains Venice; references to the necessity of keeping the tourist industry going are the motive for hiding the cholera outbreak in Mann’s novella. But while tourism is and was Venice’s primary economic driver, the industry is also slowly in the process of destroying the city, by hastening the decay of its infrastructure. Much like the Mona Lisa, which is mobbed by crowds and can only be viewed at a distance from behind bullet-proof glass, the desire to see these astonishing things—a painting, or a magical, almost surreal city—is destroying them. Parallels can be drawn between the complicated relationships between viewers/visitors and their objects of affection (whether the Mona Lisa or Venice) and the figure of Aschenbach and his destruction in pursuit of the object of his affection, Tadzio. In the novella, Aschenbach declines to leave Venice, despite learning the truth of a cholera outbreak, because of his obsession with the Polish youth. In the end, while Tadzio is spared from the illness, Aschenbach succumbs, paying the ultimate price for his persistence in pursuing the beautiful youth.

Beyond the subject matter, Death in Venice: Pursuit provides a fascinating opportunity to examine the nature of printmaking. The print was made through a multi-step process, including two separate modes of printmaking: hard-ground etching and aquatint. Additionally, Colescott included the pressing of a found object (a small souvenir lead version of the Mona Lisa) into his printing process. To create hard-ground etching, an acid-resistant coating (the “ground”) is added to a metal plate. The artist then reveals the metal by marking through the ground with a

Key Ideas
• Visual interpretation of a classic Western literary work
• Different printmaking processes used to create different effects
• Distinct divisions between colors and subjects, and the effect of different colors and shapes on interpretation

Discussion Questions
1. How would you describe the colors? Are they vibrant? Sickly? How do they direct your attention to various parts of the image? What do the colors make you think of and how do they make you feel?
2. Notice how Warrington Colescott has organized the composition. How would you describe the scene and what is taking place? What parts seem realistic and what seems exaggerated or improbable? How has the artist created these effects?
3. How does your response to the image change when you view the black-and-white version?
4. Have you ever visited Venice or another destination that is similarly popular? What do you think Colescott is trying to say by including the modern tourists in the print?
pointed object, often a special type of needle. By using a pointed metal object to scratch into the ground, Colescott is able to make very precise, fine lines, like those delineating the architectural features of the cityscape in the upper background, or the pattern on the shirt of the central tourist with the hat and camera at the bottom foreground. The plate is then dipped in acid, and the exposed metal is eaten away making incised lines where the artist had scratched through the ground; the areas of the plate where the ground remains are smooth and flat.

The dramatic colors were applied through the process of aquatint, which is the addition of colored pigments to the plate. It is clear in Death in Venice: Pursuit that Colescott carefully layered the pigments of the print to make the distinct colorful zones. Despite the hard divisions of the colors, which are particularly visible between the blue and green of the figures and archways in the lower third, they were not all added with such precision. The loose, applied brushwork of the yellow is visible in the figure of Aschenbach in the upper third. This color seems to be “infecting” the figure, and might suggest how Aschenbach became sick from the city itself.

Distinct from the lines and color, the Mona Lisa figure reveals softer modeling, with a different texture and a different application of color, because it was made through a different process. To create the Mona Lisa, the artist used a lead image of the figure—a small souvenir—which he put through the printing press to deeply emboss the paper of the print. By using a different process, the Mona Lisa becomes even more distinct from the rest of the print and brings in a host of issues unrelated to Death in Venice, including references to Renaissance portraiture, ideas about the nature of the artist (which is touched upon in the novella because Aschenbach is a successful author), and even the variability of printmaking, because as Colescott made additional editions of this print series the lead depiction of Mona Lisa flattened and distorted her appearance.

In contrast to the color print, the black-and-white version of Pursuit creates an even more sinister image. By only using black and white with shades of gray the print makes Aschenbach appear only in outline. He becomes like a ghost haunting the similarly eerie cityscape behind him, appropriately empty for a place stricken with cholera.

**The Artist: Biographical Notes**

Warrington Colescott is a Wisconsin printmaker, born in Oakland California in 1921 and currently living in Hollandale. He is a professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where he was chair of the department of art from 1949 to 1978. In 1970, he was approached by Aquarius Press (Baltimore and New York) to illustrate texts of his choosing. He immediately chose Death in Venice, Thomas Mann’s 1912 novella, which had fascinated the artist in college. In 1971, Colescott published ten images illustrating the story, printed in full-color and as a black-and-white monochrome series. To prepare for the project, Colescott travelled to Venice to follow Aschenbach’s journey through the city and provide a modern perspective to the early-twentieth-century story.