THE EXHIBITION

Figuring History: Robert Colescott, Kerry James Marshall, Mickalene Thomas brings together three generations of prominent contemporary American artists whose work reassesses history painting. The paintings of Robert Colescott, Kerry James Marshall, and Mickalene Thomas offer perspectives on Black culture and representation in an ever-changing social and political landscape. Though individual in style and subject matter, these artists are united by presenting counter-narratives to a Western art history dominated by European ideals.

This guide explores four works from the exhibition, specifically how these artists celebrate the Black figure. Each exercise starts with looking questions for getting started and diving deeper, and has background information about the artists and their work. Use this guide in your classroom or on a visit to the Seattle Art Museum. A blank sheet is included for you to select additional works of art from the exhibition to think about with your students.

Information in this guide is adapted from the exhibition catalogue Figuring History: Robert Colescott, Kerry James Marshall, Mickalene Thomas by Catharina Manchanda, Jacqueline Francis, and Lowery Stokes Sims (2017). We would like to thank our Advisory Committee of Donté Felder, Head Teacher at Orca K–8 Middle School in the Seattle Public Schools, and Eve Sanford, Education and Public Programs Director at the Northwest African American Museum, for their work on this guide.
COMPLEX CONVERSATIONS

This exhibition directly addresses negative racial stereotypes, Black and female representation, and racially motivated violence. Before leading conversations with your students, reflect on your own identity and be cognizant of how that identity shapes your personal perspective and biases. Prepare your students for these conversations with the following techniques, which are adapted from The Studio Museum in Harlem presentation at the 2017 National Arts Education Association Museum Education Division Pre-Conference.

1. At the beginning of the discussion or visit, set group expectations of a respectful dialogue.
2. Honor individual experiences and avoid stereotyping with “I” statements.
3. When possible, begin with less controversial information and build to more complex topics.
4. Encourage students to step up and step back—create space for those to speak who do not normally do so and encourage thoughtful listening.
5. If a student says something concerning, try to ask for more information to find an underlying issue. Create an environment in which the group can unpack the statement, to take the spotlight off the student who voiced this and help others who may feel similarly to process.
6. Allow time for quiet reflection and check in with students after difficult conversations.

PRE-VISIT

When using this guide to prepare for a visit to the museum, use one or all of the enclosed images and activities so your students will be ready to explore the themes of the exhibition.

AT THE MUSEUM

During your visit, this guide will give you an overview of the art you will see in Figuring History. Expand your experience to explore works in SAM’s Collections with the Cell Phone Tour.

Looking to broaden your visit? Compare works in Figuring History to those on view in our American and European galleries. Who is in these paintings? What story are they telling?

POST-VISIT

Continue your discussion with additional resources.

- Explore historical and contemporary American portraiture by John Singleton Copley and Kehinde Wiley in our Made in America: Exploring American History through Art Outreach Suitcase*.

*Hyperlinked URL can be found in the glossary.
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LOOKING QUESTIONS

School of Beauty, School of Culture, 2012, Kerry James Marshall, acrylic and glitter on unstretched canvas, 108 x 158 in., Birmingham Museum of Art, Museum purchase with funds provided by Elizabeth (Bibby) Smith, the Collectors Circle for Contemporary Art, Jane Comer, the Sankofa Society, and general acquisition funds, 2012.57, © Kerry James Marshall.

GETTING STARTED

What’s going on here? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find?

Where would you place yourself in this painting? Why?

In this scene, what details do you see? What might it sound like? How does it feel?

DIVING DEEPER

What does the title mean to you?

Outside of school, are there places where you learn?

How do you think this painting challenges stereotypes of Black culture?

What do you find beautiful about your culture?
ABOUT THE WORK

INFORMATION

Kerry James Marshall was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1955, grew up in the Watts district of Los Angeles, and now works in Chicago. He has works of art in major museums around the world and works in a variety of media, including painting, drawing, and sculpture. He often explores the absence of people of color in Western art and creates monumental works featuring Black figures. In School of Beauty, School of Culture, Marshall creates a richly layered composition from several smaller scenes at a beauty salon. The work celebrates an important place of Black community while referencing European art history. For example, Marshall references the floating skull in Hans Holbein the Younger’s 1533 painting, The Ambassadors*, by replacing it with an image of Disney’s Sleeping Beauty. By doing so, he asks the viewer to consider their own ideas of beauty. The artist includes himself in the image as the photographer reflected in the mirror at the center of the painting.

ACTIVITY

This painting is full of rich details. Pick one aspect of the work and draw it on a piece of paper. Why did you select this particular detail? Does drawing one detail make you think differently about this work? How or why?

STANDARDS

WASHINGTON STATE EDUCATION STANDARDS: ARTS

1.2 Develop arts skills and techniques.

1.3 Understand and apply arts styles from various artist, cultures, and times.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening

Presentation of Knowledge and Idea
4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

CREATING

Anchor Standard 1
Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

RESPONDING

Anchor Standard 7
Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard 8
Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

CONNECTING

Anchor Standard 11
Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historic context to deepen understandings.

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LOOKING QUESTIONS


GETTING STARTED

What’s going on here? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find?

Where do you think the scene is taking place? During what time period?

What do you think is the relationship is between these figures?

DIVING DEEPER

What do you think the artist is trying to communicate?

Would you perceive this work in a different way if it were painted by a woman?

Would that perception change if this was a group of men rather than women?
INFORMATION

Robert Colescott (1925–2009) confronts issues of race, gender, and the legacy of Western art history in his paintings. He studied and taught in France and Egypt in the 1960s, and this experience allowed him to return to the United States and address issues of representation with a new perspective. In Les Demoiselles d’Alabama: Vestidas, Colescott reimagines a famous work of art from the early 20th century, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* by Spanish artist Pablo Picasso. Colescott replaces the white women and muted tones of Picasso’s painting with a diverse group of women and bright colors. Rather than being defined by angular lines, Colescott’s figures have bold curving lines. Colescott asks viewers to question art history and the story it tells.

ACTIVITY

In this piece which was painted in 1985, Colescott is expanding how we see and figure women. How might this look different today? Are there ways in which you would like this piece to be more inclusive?

Create a quick sketch of your idea.

STANDARDS

WASHINGTON STATE EDUCATION STANDARDS: ARTS

3.2 Uses the arts to communicate for a specific purpose.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Anchor Standard for Writing
Text Types and Purposes
3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

PRESENTING

Anchor Standard 6
Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

*Hyperlinked URL can be found in the glossary.
**LOOKING QUESTIONS**

*Resist, 2017, Mickalene Thomas, rhinestones, acrylic, gold leaf, and oil stick on canvas mounted on wood panel, 84 x 108 x 2 in., © Mickalene Thomas.*

**GETTING STARTED**

What’s going on here? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find?

How does this work make you feel? How do the colors help create this feeling?

Does this work of art express an idea or an emotion?

How do the colors, lines, shapes, and movement help make that happen?

**DIVING DEEPER**

Pick one of the smaller images in the work and look closely. What is going on?

How did the artist connect this image to the larger work?

This work was made in 2017. What imagery do you recognize? Does this remind you of anything you’ve seen, read, or heard about? What can you learn about US history in these images?

What does the title of the painting mean to you? Why do you think the artist gave the painting this title?
ABOUT THE WORK

INFORMATION

Born in 1971, Mickalene Thomas explores ideas of identity, gender, beauty, and power in many media, from painting and photography to video installations. Her artwork is widely celebrated, and in 2008 she created the first individual portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama. Inspired by current events, art history, and American history, Resist focuses on images from the Civil Rights movement. Thomas screen prints well-known photographs of protests and demonstrations into the painting, along with a portrait of writer and activist James Baldwin. She then overpains them with bold colors and glitter. These colors and lines become most aggressive around the central photograph of the high school student, Walter Gadsden, being attacked by a police dog during a Civil Rights protest. This photograph by Bill Hudson was printed in the New York Times on May 4, 1963, and used as a symbol of police violence against Black protestors. With the title, Thomas makes a connection between the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s and today’s ongoing activism against police violence toward people of color and subsequent protests happening today.

ACTIVITY

In 1962, James Baldwin wrote, “not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” In Resist, Mickalene Thomas addresses police violence against the Black community. Drawing inspiration from Thomas’s work, write a poem or short story to share your feelings about an issue important in your community.

STANDARDS

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Anchor Standard for Writing
Production and Distribution of Writing
4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purposed, and audience.
LOOKING QUESTIONS

GETTING STARTED

What’s going on here? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find?

What is the first thing you noticed? Why do you think you looked there first?

Why do you think the people in this work are looking directly at us? How would the painting be different if they were not looking at us?

DIVING DEEPER

What are some adjectives you would use to describe this work? What art elements, like line, color, or shape, did the artist use to make you use those adjectives?

Does this work of art express emotion? Whose emotion is expressed in this work of art?

How does this work respond to images of Black women we see in the media?

*Le déjeuner sur l’herbe: Les trois femmes noires*, 2010, Mickalene Thomas, rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel, 120 x 288 x 2 in., The Rachel and Jean-Pierre Lehmann Collection, Courtesy of the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong, © Mickalene Thomas
Mickalene Thomas’s *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe: Les trois femmes noires* is a reimagining of Édouard Manet’s 1863 painting *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe*, translated from the French as *Luncheon on the Grass*. In Manet’s original, a naked white woman is looking directly at the viewer, as she lounges with two clothed white men. In Thomas’s painting, all three figures are powerful Black women, staring directly at the viewer. Thomas, an openly gay Black woman, takes the representation of Black women back from European heterosexual male painters whose works traditionally dominate museum collections. To construct this large painting, Thomas first photographed three models in wigs with costumes and props and composed the painting based on the photograph to create a mosaic-like final work. Learn more about the artist’s process in this [Teaching Packet from the Brooklyn Museum of Art](#).

### ABOUT THE WORK

### INFORMATION

**Le déjeuner sur l’herbe: Les trois femmes noires** is a reimagining of Édouard Manet’s 1863 painting *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe*, translated from the French as *Luncheon on the Grass*. In Manet’s original, a naked white woman is looking directly at the viewer, as she lounges with two clothed white men. In Thomas’s painting, all three figures are powerful Black women, staring directly at the viewer. Thomas, an openly gay Black woman, takes the representation of Black women back from European heterosexual male painters whose works traditionally dominate museum collections. To construct this large painting, Thomas first photographed three models in wigs with costumes and props and composed the painting based on the photograph to create a mosaic-like final work. Learn more about the artist’s process in this [Teaching Packet from the Brooklyn Museum of Art](#).

### ACTIVITY

**Step One** In *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe: Les trois femmes noires*, Thomas shows three powerful women in conversation, dressed in brightly patterned dresses with bold, gold jewelry and bright makeup. When do you feel powerful? Think about how you and your friends get together to talk about what is going on in your world. Who are you with and what are you wearing? As a class, brainstorm some key ideas that come to mind. Encourage students to think of the positive aspects of these relationships and moments.

**Step Two** Divide students into groups of three and have them work on acting out a pose that incorporates some of the ideas they brainstormed. What image do they want to make of three friends talking things out? What poses show their power? What clothes are important to them? Encourage them to think about props or clothing as costumes if available.

**Step Three** Have each group do a 30 second “freeze frame” of their scene for the whole class. When finished, ask for the rest of the class to share how the pose they struck made them feel.

**Step Four** Complete the project by having students write a reflection piece about the scene. What choices did they make? What were they trying to convey? What might they have done differently?

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ABOUT THE WORK

STANDARDS

WASHINGTON STATE EDUCATION STANDARDS: ARTS

1.2 Develop arts skills and techniques.
1.3 Understand and apply arts styles from various artists, cultures, and times.
3.2 Uses the arts to communicate for a specific purpose.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS: ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

Anchor Standard for Writing
Production and Distribution of Writing
4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

CREATING
Anchor Standard 1
Generates and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

PRESENTING
Anchor Standard 6
Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

CONNECTING
Anchor Standard 11
Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historic context to deepen understandings.
**GLOSSARY**

**James Baldwin** (1924–1987) A celebrated American writer who wrote of race, sexuality, and American society in the 20th century. Baldwin was active in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and his powerful writing captured the times.

**George Washington Carver** (1860s–1943) A celebrated American botanist and inventor, Carver developed techniques to improve soil conditions by rotating crops such as peanuts and sweet potatoes rather than cotton. These techniques both improved the lives of farmers and had positive environmental impacts. Carver was a professor at the Tuskegee Institute for nearly 50 years and was the first Black faculty member at Iowa State University.

**Caricature** A representation of a person or thing that exaggerates their most striking or characteristic features. Famous people and political figures are often drawn as caricatures by cartoonists to humorous ends. Caricatures, when thought of as an accurate likeness, are transformed into stereotypes.

**Collage** A two-dimensional form of art in which pieces of paper, fabric, photographs, newspaper, cardboard, and other materials are arranged and glued to a flat surface.

**Composition** The arrangement of an art work’s formal elements.*

**Identity** How one views oneself, how others perceive you, and how a society as a whole defines groups of people.*

**Installation art** A work of art created for a specific architectural or environmental situation. Installation art often engages multiple senses such as sight, smell, and hearing.*

**History Painting** Large-scale painting which represents either historical events or scenes from legend and literature.*

**Édouard Manet** (1832–1883) A 19th-century French painter known for depicting modern life and often seen as an inspiration to the group of artists who became known as the Impressionists. Impressionism is characterized by depictions of everyday life emphasizing the capturing of a moment through light and color.

**Monumental art** A grand or simplistic work of art that is often very large.

**Mosaic** A decoration made by inlaying small pieces of colored material to create pictures or patterns.

**Representation** How people are shown in works of art.

**Satire** Exposing human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn.*

**Stereotype** A generalized type, or a caricature of a person, place or culture, often negative in tone.*

**George Washington** (1732–1799) The first president of the United States, Washington was Commander of the Continental Army during the American Revolutionary War, and led the Constitutional Convention, which resulted in the creation of the US Constitution.

**Western art** Fine art such as painting or sculpture, rooted in Europe and European culture that extends into the United States. Begins as far back as prehistoric times and extends into the present.

*These definitions are borrowed from Art21’s Educator Guides*

**Links**

http://bit.ly/2ETmLZn


Page 7: http://mo.ma/2lVwQBp

Page 11: http://bit.ly/1AdxIkA
http://bit.ly/2GYUoRf

ACTIVITY

WORK OF ART

SKETCH THE WORK

LOOK CLOSELY

What do you see?

What do you think about that?

What does it make you wonder?
School of Beauty, School of Culture, 2012, Kerry James Marshall, acrylic and glitter on unstretched canvas, 108 x 158 in., Birmingham Museum of Art, Museum purchase with funds provided by Elizabeth (Bibby) Smith, the Collectors Circle for Contemporary Art, Jane Comer, the Sankofa Society, and general acquisition funds, 2012.57, © Kerry James Marshall.
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