Artists' Perspectives
Envisioning the World

WALK THROUGH THE GALLERIES AT LACMA AND YOU'LL RECOGNIZE THE OBVIOUS: artists see the world in different ways. The long and colorful painting *Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio* (1980) is the work of Los Angeles–based artist David Hockney, whose distinctive use of bright colors and bold patterns captures his view of a vibrant city. Step into another gallery and face portraits, now thousands of years old, of calm, stately people, their legs and faces in profile and their broad shoulders shown frontally. Here are the people of ancient Egypt, as represented by their artists.

- What explains the different ways artists see the world and its peoples?

These curriculum materials consider how artists envision the world. Separate from observing, envisioning is the act of forming an image with the mind's eye, often after careful thought or engagement with the imagination. The artists who created the *Emperor's Twelve-Symbol Dragon Robe*, for example, envisioned what can't be seen: the cosmic order of Chinese imperial rule. The nineteenth-century photographer Seneca Ray Stoddard envisioned the Adirondacks as a wilderness area worthy of both tourism and preservation; his art served a persuasive function. Recent art by Ginny Bishton demonstrates how an artist can carefully observe a place and then, after reflection on those details, form an image that captures the experience of a place. And for South Korean artist Do-Ho Suh, envisioning is a way to remember past experiences.

- What do images communicate about an artist's view of the world?
- Can we, by example, look at our world in a new way, forming images that express a view of the world we inhabit?

Envision: Form an Image of What Can't Be Seen

Over the centuries, artists have served the needs of both church and state, depicting unseen aspects of culture: values, the authority of rulers, and the stability of society. Artists have been charged with envisioning liberty, for example, or the Holy Trinity in the Christian faith, or the beliefs of a communist society. When successful, the images that result from envisioning communicate important ideas to and about a people. If reiterated over the centuries, as in the case of the *Emperor's Twelve-Symbol Dragon Robe*, images can demonstrate the stability of a ruling structure. The dragon appears on Chinese art objects that date back thousands of years. Although its precise meaning and the origin of its use remain unclear, the association of the dragon with Chinese rulers existed well before the establishment of the first empire by the Qin in 221 BC. By the time the dragon appeared on the *Emperor's Twelve-Symbol Dragon Robe* in the nineteenth century, artists and members of Chinese society knew immediately that the man who wore this robe was the emperor. Additional symbols reinforced his authority, and a range of good luck symbols sought to bring him success.

Envision: Form an Image to Express an Opinion

Seneca Ray Stoddard's photograph *Glass Globe at Fort William Henry Hotel, New York* (c. 1885) has been called a type of self-portrait because the artist's own image is so clearly visible. By capturing the reflection off the mirrored surface of the glass globe, Stoddard has included himself in the moment. In fact, most of Stoddard's photographs are so infused with his opinions of the Adirondacks that they almost function as portraits of his ideas. As the American writer Joan Didion has noted, "For however dutifully we record what we see around us, the common denominator of all we see is always, transparently, shamelessly, the implacable 'I.'"[1] A self-trained photographer, Stoddard rarely turned the camera on himself. Instead, he chose to frame images of the wilderness that reflected his twin beliefs in the importance of tourism in the Adirondacks and the need to preserve the area. His writings also leave little doubt about his opinions. In 1873, he published the first of his illustrated guidebooks to New York's Lake George, the body of water seen in this photograph. He wrote:

> *Off for Lake George! How the heart bounds and the pulse quickens at the very sound of the words that bring with them thoughts of the holy lake. In fancy we once again breathe the air, heavy with the odor of pines and cedar, or fragrant with the breath of blossoming clover.*[2]

---

[1] Joan Didion, quoted in the frontispiece to *The camera i: Photographic Self-Portraits from the Audrey and Sydney Irmas Collection,* by Robert A. Sobieszek and Deborah Irmas (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1994).

[2] Seneca Ray Stoddard, quoted in Jeffrey L. Horrell, *Seneca Ray Stoddard: Transforming the Adirondack Wilderness in Text and Image* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 77.

Envision: Form an Image after Careful Reflection

Envisioning is often the act of centering one's thoughts, of carefully reflecting on what is seen or imagined. Los Angeles–based artist Ginny Bishton employs careful observation and reflection in her artistic process. *Walking 1* is part of a group of collages she has created after taking a number of steps, literally and figuratively. She walks in her neighborhood with a camera pointed directly downward, capturing the minutiae at her feet that many would overlook. She then cuts these photographs into tiny circles and arranges them into abstract patterns. The world she depicts includes obvious forms, such as flowers and blades of grass, but she also captures something else: a fragment of the experience of moving slowly and thoughtfully through her neighborhood. Her art thus becomes an opportunity for the viewer to do the same. Center one's thoughts, reflect on familiar details of a place, and be willing to discover—or envision—something unexpected.

Envision: Form an Image as a Way to Remember

We form images with our senses, but we hold them in our memories, recalling them for a variety of reasons. For the Korean-born artist Do-Ho Suh, the memory of his childhood home inspired his work *Gate* (2005). Made to scale, this fabric sculpture allows visitors to experience a familiar act from Suh's childhood in Seoul: walking through the entrance to his home. Clearly the gate isn't the one he really knew, however; it's made of silk and passage through *Gate* does not lead to a home. It is at once a fragile representation of a personal memory and, when displayed in a public place, an invitation to viewers to think about how we form our own memories.

Making Connections with the California Curriculum

These materials illuminate the range of art created by artists who go beyond the act of simple representation. Artists bring their perspectives and opinions to their work. And, through their art, they invite our own musings. The California Visual and Performing Arts Framework encourages kindergarten students to begin this process: Make pictures expressing ideas about family and neighborhood (K.2.4). Older students refine these skills: Communicate values, opinions, or personal insights through an original work of art (5.2.7). At the same time, students recognize how visual images not only communicate ideas but influence them: Demonstrate an understanding of the effects of visual communication media (e.g., television, music videos, film, internet) on all aspects of society (8.5.3).

Emperor's Twelve-Symbol Dragon Robe

China, Qing dynasty, Daoguang period, 1821–50

THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY OF THE CHINESE EMPIRE, FROM ITS FOUNDING IN 221 BC TO ITS END IN 1911, Chinese artists created visual symbols to represent a worldview that had the emperor, the Son of Heaven, at its center. When the Daoguang emperor (r. 1821–50) put on this robe, he symbolically became the central axis of a cosmic realm that gave him both the authority to rule and the responsibility to safeguard his empire.

- What is the visual language developed by artists to communicate the unseen universe of imperial China?

The dragon has long appeared on Chinese art objects, some associated with leaders from prehistoric times. By the time this robe was made, the dragon with five claws symbolized the authority of the emperor. This dragon robe, shown from the back, includes nine dragons—a symbolic number—although only three dragons are apparent in this image. In the middle of the garment's back, a dragon is shown with a frontal view of its head. Look to the left and below the tip of the tail for a small square form encasing two dragons. They are shown in vertical form, one with its head at the top and the other in reverse; this presentation of the dragon may symbolize the complementary yin and yang forces that define eternity. Just above the hem's band are two dragons, their heads in profile and their snakelike bodies twisting and coiling as mirror images.

The twelve symbols of the emperor's authority appear on the front and back of this robe. One symbol is the pheasant, seen near the right edge, directly across from the square with the two dragons. The pheasant represents the bird kingdom, which, together with the animal kingdom (represented by the dragon), create the natural world that the emperor rules. On its own, the pheasant is usually associated with the emperor's literary refinement. Another imperial symbol is seen near the right edge, above the hem's band: the round shape with dots represents a tray with millet, suggesting the prosperity of the empire.

In addition to communicating the emperor's authority, artists also sought ways to express the harmony of the world ruled by the emperor. This robe has a strong vertical line that runs up the back. On either side, forms such as the dragons mirror each other. Chinese characters, most expressing good luck or long life, appear twice, on either side of this vertical line as do small bats. Shown with silver wings outstretched, they are another symbol of happiness and longevity. Notice the repeating band of wavy lines at the hem and on each sleeve. These sections symbolize water, above which waves and then billowing clouds open onto three shapes representing mountains. In Chinese belief, the world was made up of mountains (or earth) surrounded by water.

The Daoguang emperor wore this dragon robe on ceremonial occasions and during meetings with foreign dignitaries—times when he needed to convey his strength and authority—a message reinforced by artists who envisioned and gave visual form to the universe he ruled.

- Which national and state symbols best express the beliefs we share about our country, our state?
- The leaders of America, our elected president and members of government, wear the same type of clothing worn by people employed outside of government. What does the clothing of elected American officials communicate about our beliefs in democracy?
- An American president often wears a lapel pin on his suit jacket, showing a small version of the American flag. Design a new lapel pin—or perhaps a necktie—for the president of the United States. Include objects you believe reflect American ideals, and consider what colors and shapes express optimism or prosperity. Then, compare the Chinese dragon robe with your design. How are the two pictures of the world similar? How are they different?

Emperor's Twelve-Symbol Dragon Robe
China, Qing dynasty, Daoguang period, 1821–50
Silk and metal thread, tapestry weave (*kesi*), Center back length: 60 5/16 in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Purchased with funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. William M. Carpenter, Helena and Boyd Krout, Mrs. Harry Lenart, Terry and Lionel Bell, John and Leslie Dorman, Beverly J. and Herbert M. Gelfand, Elyse and Stanley Grinstein, Diana Jonsson, Tally and Bill Mingst, Mr. and Mrs. R. P. Toeppen, Diane Keith, Mr. and Mrs. Jeremy Fair, Leona Palmer, and Dr. and Mrs. Richard A. Simms through the 1997 Collectors Committee, and the Costume Council AC1997.89.1
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Seneca Ray Stoddard
United States, 1843–1917

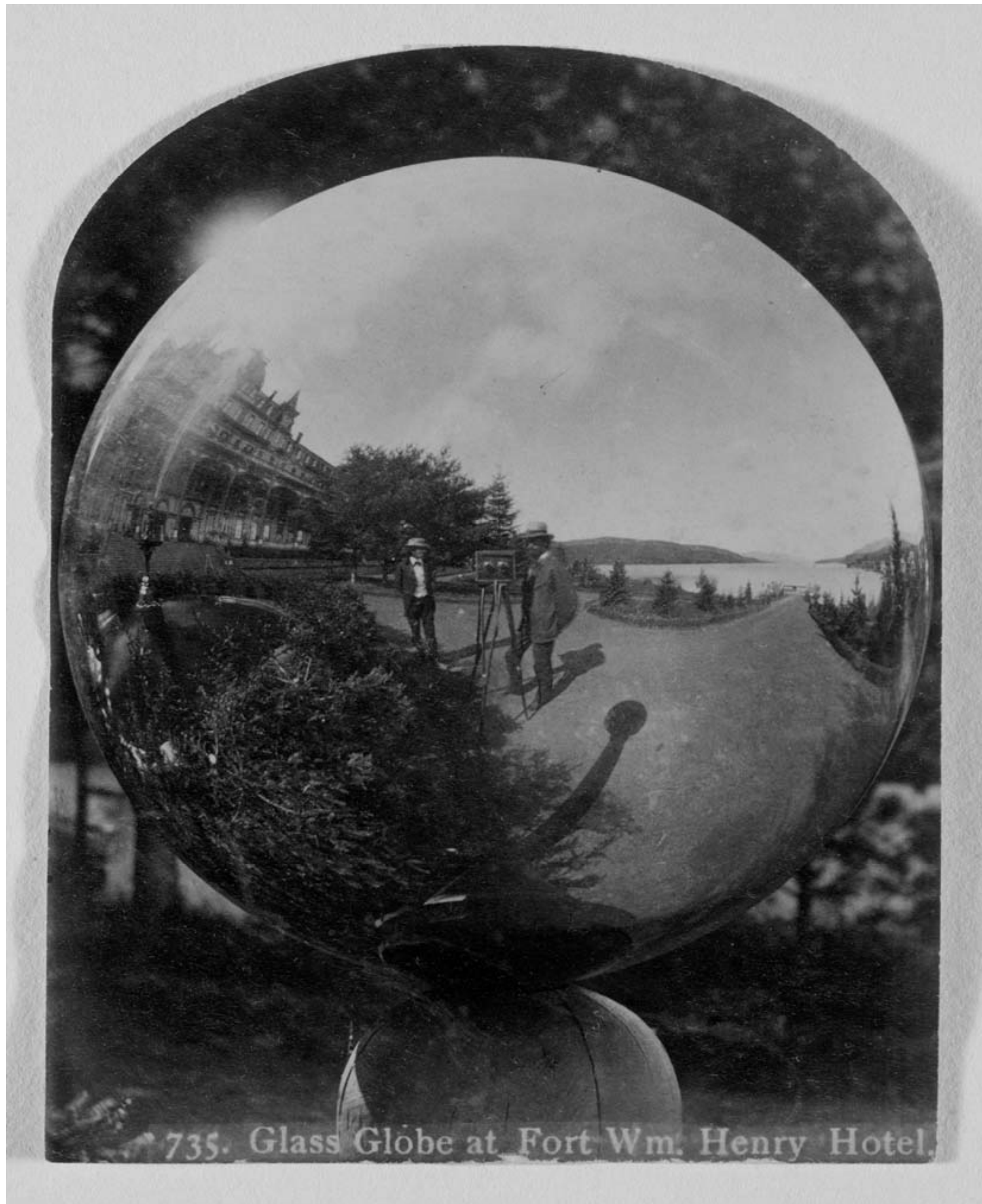
Glass Globe at Fort William Henry Hotel, New York, c. 1885

To fully understand this photograph, focus on the large circular form that occupies most of the image. This is a gazing ball, a mirrored orb that reflects what is over the shoulders of the person looking at it. In this case, the photographer Seneca Ray Stoddard has set up his camera in the garden of a hotel. What he and his assistant see (and we see) reflected in the ball, on a very bright and sunny day, are their own images and the landscape behind them. The waters of New York's Lake George stretch between the Adirondack Mountains. The Fort William Henry Hotel, one of the luxury hotels built after the Civil War, overlooks the lake. The rising spray of a garden fountain partially obscures one of the hotel's distinctive towers.

Seneca Ray Stoddard spent his life in the Adirondacks, an area in upstate New York known for its picturesque mountains and sparkling lakes. Stoddard witnessed the dramatic transformation of this area from an isolated preserve of hunters, miners, and loggers to a tourist destination for Americans who, in the years after the Civil War, had both the money and leisure time to travel. Stoddard's photographs (and he made thousands of them) served two purposes. They helped Americans envision an area most had never visited. The individual photographs and guidebooks he wrote and illustrated showed pictures of wealthy people relaxing on the verandas of the new luxury hotels, sitting along the shores of lakes as part of writing or sketching clubs or listening to stories told around campfires. People could picture themselves in a Stoddard photo and plan a trip. Before they returned home, these very tourists could purchase—in the hotel lobby or onboard the train—a souvenir booklet with Stoddard's photos to help them remember their trip to the Adirondacks.

Not only did Stoddard help people envision and then remember the Adirondacks, he also used his photographs to express his opinion about preserving the area. The industrialization of post–Civil War America affected many wilderness areas, from the Adirondacks in New York to the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California. Stoddard witnessed the massive cutting of forests. He saw the damage both the industry and the transport of the logs caused to waterways. He documented environmental damage in his photographs and became an outspoken proponent of designating a wilderness preserve. He presented a lecture, illustrated with slides, to the New York legislature in 1892 and traveled the state to sway the opinions of New Yorkers. In May of that same year, the legislature established a six-million-acre area called the Adirondack Park.

- Choose a timely subject for class discussion, perhaps protection of wilderness areas today versus the search for energy sources. Select photographs from magazines or newspapers that present two different points of view. How do photographs express a point of view? How did the photographer envision the subject under discussion?
- California is a tourist destination for many people. Find images made for tourists, in print ads and brochures. How do these images of California compare with the images we have, living here day to day?



SENECA RAY STODDARD
United States, 1843–1917
Glass Globe at Fort William Henry Hotel, New York, c. 1885
Albumen print, toned, 3 11/16 x 2 15/16 in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
The Audrey and Sydney Irmas Collection AC1992.197.122
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Ginny Bishton
United States, b. 1967

Walking 1, 1998

- Picture a walk through your neighborhood. What comes to mind?

Los Angeles–based artist Ginny Bishton observes details on her walks. She records what she sees by pointing her camera straight down to photograph the plants and flowers lining a path, as well as the stones and rocks that make up the surface. For people drawn to the beauty of the sky or a canopy of trees or a neighbor's new car, these small details underfoot may remain unnoticed. And in a sprawling metropolis like Los Angeles, small details of nature often get lost in a landscape defined by billboards, noisy freeways, and towering, swaying palms.

Bishton takes time to look carefully; time is central to her artistic process. Each color in *Walking 1* is a carefully cut circle from a photograph she took outdoors. She arranges the colored dots and glues them into a specific pattern that communicates a sense of her experience.

Walking 1 includes two abstract shapes that resemble paths. Neither has a clear beginning nor end, and the upper one is cut off at the top, making the viewing experience as open-ended as a leisurely walk. Colored dots form discrete areas that temporarily hold our focus, while lines push our attention along. Bishton provides an abstract landscape in which the viewer can wander and make personal discoveries. Her work is also an invitation to viewers, she has written, "to notice the landscape in unexpected ways."

Envisioning a place, even a familiar place like your neighborhood, can result in mental pictures that change with each new observation. And the smallest, most overlooked details may enliven a common path or lead to new ones.

- When you think of your neighborhood, what is the single detail that stands out?
- Walk through your neighborhood and focus only on the tiniest details near your feet. How do these details change your sense of place?
- Imagine sending a picture or collage to a friend who has never visited your neighborhood. What would you include in your picture that would help your friend envision where you live?

GINNY BISHTON
United States, b. 1967
Walking 1, 1998
Photocollage on paper, 17 x 18½ in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Modern and Contemporary Art Council, 1998 Art Here and Now Purchase AC1999.4.1
© 2009 Ginny Bishton
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

Do-Ho Suh
South Korea, b. 1962

Gate, 2005

FLOATING JUST ABOVE THE FLOOR, THIS SILK REPRESENTATION OF A TRADITIONAL KOREAN ENTRY GATE DOESN'T match what we know about architecture. What should be heavy stone surmounted by wooden beams and ceramic tile is instead a nearly weightless, gauzy, and transparent replica sewn in silk and hung from the ceiling on metal tubes. Based on the entry to South Korean artist Do-Ho Suh's childhood home in Seoul, the gate evokes a memory more than reality.

Do-Ho Suh studied art in the United States and now divides his time between studios in the U.S. and South Korea. In 1994 he started his series of "fabric-architecture" in part to answer a longing he felt for his Korean home. He built life-size rooms and architectural details that he remembered. He has installed the works in international museums and art galleries. The materials he chooses, as well as the construction of the sculptures, link the artist to Korea, where he commissions women who use traditional practices to stitch together his picture of home.

Early in his career, the choice of lightweight fabric allowed Suh literally to carry his home—or his image of home—with him, folded in suitcases. "I think home is something that you carry along with your life. . . . I didn't want to sit down and cry for home. I wanted to more actively deal with these issues of longing. I decided not to be sad about it. I just want to go with it. I just want to carry that with me, you know, all the time."[3]

The entry gate he remembers in this work also holds another layer of memories. Suh's father, a painter and poet, collected fragments of historic buildings that were torn down in Seoul in the 1950s and '60s during a modernization of the city. He assembled these fragments into a residence (including the gate) that he designed as a traditional scholar's house. In this way, Suh's father remembered the past by incorporating its remnants into a new family home.

Like Suh's other "fabric-architecture" sculptures, *Gate* is life-size, big enough to allow visitors to walk through and around the piece. The artist's private memory becomes a public space in which visitors can create their own meanings; in this way, the work is analogous to his father's use of shared historic memories to create a private home. The choice of material—so thin and gauzy and, to some, even ghostly—adds a note of fragility to the work. Do memories of home carry the same weight as the stones and wood of architecture? They can, if one envisions home as a memory.

- What is your picture of home?
- If you grew up in another country, how do you carry memories of your childhood home?
- In your neighborhood or town, are there buildings that contribute to the identity of the community? What happens when historic buildings are torn down?
- Create a picture of a doorway you enter or see every day. Then write a poem or short essay on what this doorway means to you.

---

[3] Interview, "Seoul Home/L.A. Home . . ." & Displacement," at www.pbs.org/art21/artists/suh/clip1.html.

Do-Ho Suh
South Korea, b. 1962
Gate, 2005
Silk and stainless steel tube, 128½ x 83¼ x 39¼ in.
Los Angeles County Museum of Art
Purchased with funds provided by Carla and Fred Sands
through the 2006 Collectors Committee M.2006.104
© Do-Ho Suh
Photo © 2009 Museum Associates/LACMA

These curriculum materials were prepared by Susan Hoffmann, Elizabeth Mackey, and Rachel Bernstein and designed by Jenifer Shell.

© 2009 Museum Associates/Los Angeles County Museum of Art. All rights reserved.

Funding for Evenings for Educators is provided by the Joseph Drown Foundation and the Kenneth T. and Eileen L. Norris Foundation.

Education programs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are supported in part by the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and the William Randolph Hearst Endowment Fund for Arts Education.