

Empathy through Art

Educators and researchers have long discussed practical ways to help classroom students empathize with people who lived in the past. The term “historical empathy” has gained wider currency in recent years, partially due to the Common Core State Standards’ (CCSS) emphasis on working with primary sources and engaging in discipline-specific practices like historical thinking. Historical empathy is typically defined as the cognitive and affective (emotional) ability to describe the past through the eyes and experiences of those who were there, as revealed through their writings (literature, speeches, diaries, etc.), art, artifacts, and other cultural expressions. To develop strong skills in historical empathy, teachers and students are encouraged to approach history as an interpretive discipline consisting of many different, and at times contradictory, stories.

The artists and artworks in these materials directly relate to four significant historical events or periods covered in the History-Social Science Content Standards for California Public Schools: westward expansion; industrialization and child labor; World War I; and World War II. Each example illustrates how the artist’s background, their experiences, and the cultural context in which they were working influenced their perspective on current events. The artists also employed different strategies and a variety of media, from photography and printmaking to sculptural assemblage, to create pieces that would make a strong impact on viewers. Teachers can approach these artworks in classroom settings as rich evidence of unique historical perspectives. The artworks complement textbook learning and invite students to ask questions, conduct research, empathize, form reasoned judgments, and compare sources to better understand how and why people in the past made the choices they did.

Edward Sheriff Curtis’s photographs of Native American peoples from 1900 to 1930 are important primary sources for learning about the complicated history of westward expansion and how many Euro-Americans viewed Native Americans in this period. His photographs can also inspire students to take an interest in the perspectives of both historical and contemporary indigenous peoples. Photographs by Lewis Wickes Hine of newsboys in New York and St. Louis during the same period give a face to the child labor reform movement and ask viewers to put themselves in other peoples’ shoes. *The Parents* (1922–23), a woodcut print by German artist Käthe Kollwitz, represents the human consequences of World War I by focusing on the emotional experiences of survivors. Finally, twentieth-century artist Edward Kienholz’s sculpture *History as a Planter* (1961) can provoke discussion about the Holocaust and its place in collective memory.

When students study history through a combination of primary and secondary sources that represent diverse perspectives and media, they are better able to develop the advanced literacy skills needed to meet CCSS. Teaching with a focus on cultivating empathy also supports one of the key goals of history education in the United States: to prepare students for participation in a pluralist democracy by building skills in reasoned judgment, perspective taking, and consideration for the common good. Furthermore, data gathered from a recent study at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas shows that young people who are exposed to art in an atmosphere that encourages close looking, inquiry, and open discussion develop stronger critical-thinking skills, display higher levels of tolerance, and exhibit increased historical empathy.

We hope that these materials will inspire teachers to incorporate objects from LACMA’s permanent collection into lessons in History, Civics and

Government, Geography, and English Language Arts. Teachers can help students develop historical empathy by practicing close analysis of a combination of primary and secondary sources; posing open-ended questions that relate to broad areas of historical study and support evidence-based argumentation; and encouraging students to exercise both intellectual and emotional skills to understand historical perspectives. Students who engage deeply with historical sources are better prepared to approach contemporary issues with criticality and empathy.

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Cheyenne Matron, 1910
Waterproof Parkas, Nunivak, 1928
Edward Sheriff Curtis

By the end of the nineteenth century, the United States government concluded that the country's western frontier—problematically characterized by historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893 as “an area of free land” and “the meeting point between savagery and civilization”—no longer existed. According to the 1890 U.S. census, this meant that there was no longer any point in the country beyond which the population density was less than two persons per square mile. The frontier's official closure inspired many Americans to take a greater interest in conserving the country's natural wonders. Important milestones for the conservation movement in this period, commonly known as the Progressive Era, include the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 and the founding of the Sierra Club by naturalist John Muir in 1892.

Americans' desire to protect the natural landscape was also extended toward Indigenous peoples. Years of continuous conflict, forced migration, and assimilationist efforts on the part of the U.S. government had significantly reduced Indigenous communities, impoverished them, and challenged their ability to live according to their own laws and beliefs. In addition, many Americans interpreted Indigenous adoption of certain Euro-American technologies, styles of dress, and culinary traditions as signs that Native Americans were losing their unique cultural identities.

From 1900 to 1930, American photographer and amateur ethnographer Edward Sheriff Curtis (1868–1952) traveled across the North American continent, taking more than forty thousand photographs of members of more than eighty different tribes. He conceived of his thirty-year project as a conservationist effort, fearing that if he did not immediately capture the diversity of Indigenous

peoples and their traditional ways of life on camera, they would disappear without a trace. Curtis received financial support for his work from prominent figures such as President Theodore Roosevelt and railroad tycoon J. P. Morgan.

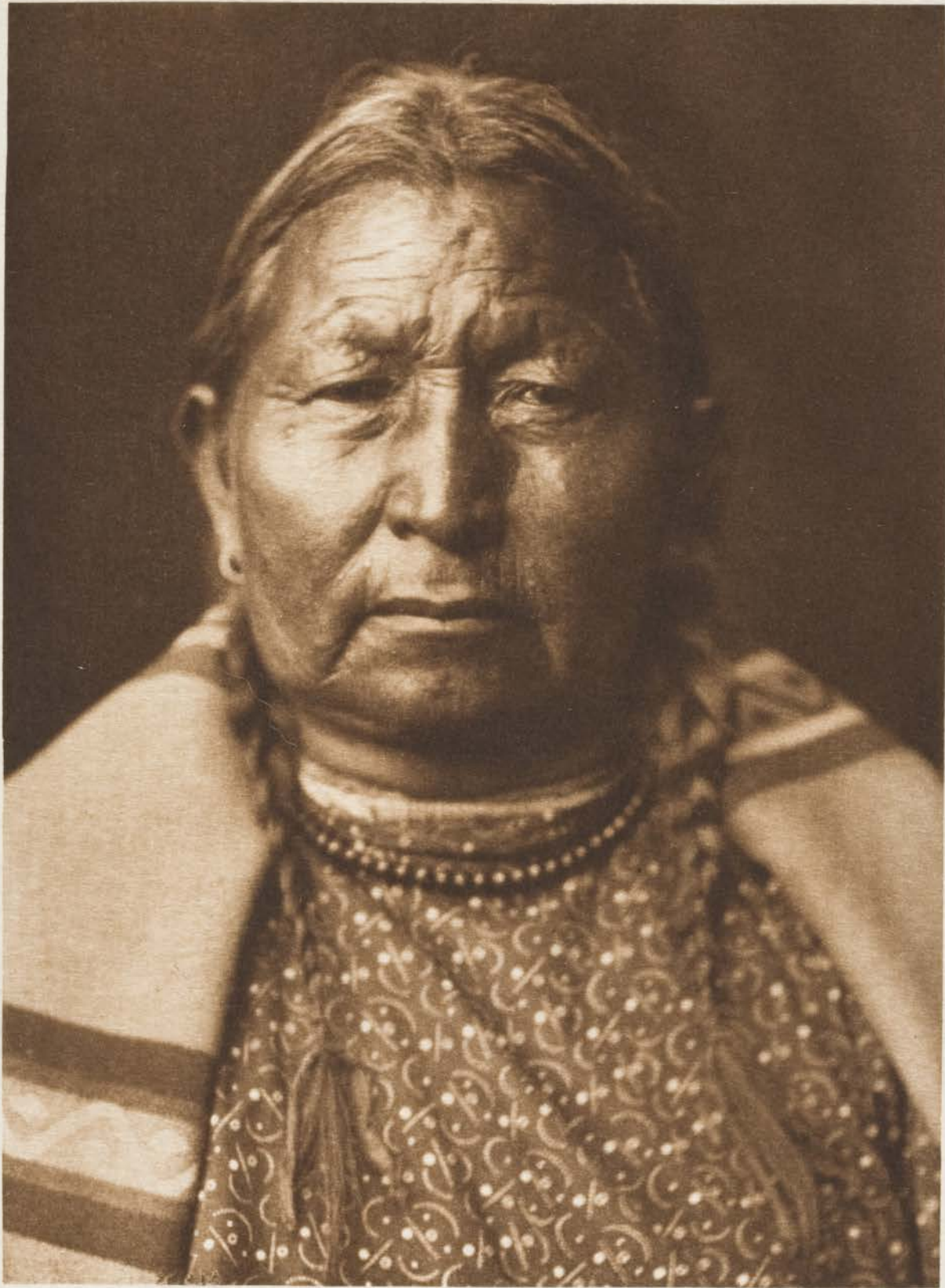
Curtis's photographs *Cheyenne Matron* (1910) and *Waterproof Parkas, Nunivak* (1928) depict people with historic homelands in southeastern Montana and Alaska, respectively. *Cheyenne Matron* is a portrait of an elderly Northern Cheyenne woman who sits or stands against a neutral background that seems devoid of context. Bright light emanating from a lamp to the woman's upper right accentuates the lines of her face. She wears a printed calico dress or shirt, a beaded necklace, and a wool flannel blanket draped over her shoulders. Her eyes draw the viewer in and seem to express a range of complex emotions. It is likely that she is a survivor of many difficult experiences including the Great Sioux War (1876–77), the Northern Cheyenne Tribe's forced migration to Oklahoma in the war's aftermath, and the Tribe's return to Montana in 1878–79 (known as the Northern Cheyenne Exodus).

Waterproof Parkas, Nunivak depicts two Nunivak Cup'ig people standing at the edge of a cliff and looking out at the ocean. The Nunivak Cup'ig are the primary residents of Nunivak Island, which is located off the coast of Alaska in the Bering Sea. The photograph's subjects wear hooded gut-skin parkas made of sea mammal intestine (likely seal) and mukluks, warm boots made of either reindeer or seal skin. The parkas are designed with wide hems that allow them to be fitted over the openings in kayaks when the wearer is seated, creating a waterproof seal that protects the lower half of the wearer's body from icy ocean spray.

Although Edward Curtis's photographs are primary sources—original objects created from firsthand experience at the time of the event or encounter depicted—they should not be taken at face value. We know that he took pains to frame his shots so that obvious signs of modern life such as railroads and telegraph poles could not be seen, in an attempt to depict Native Americans in a kind of timeless space that appeared unaffected by the contemporary political context. Nonetheless, Curtis was respectful of the people he photographed and sympathetic to their shared struggle for basic human rights. His photographs are material evidence of Indigenous resilience and the long, complicated history of colonial settlement in the United States.

Discussion Prompts

1. Compare the clothing worn by the people in Curtis's photographs. How does their clothing reflect the climate and/or place where they live? How does the climate and/or place where you live affect how you dress?
2. What do you know about Northern Cheyenne, Nunivak Cup'ig, and other Indigenous people living in the United States today? Where could you find more information about them? Why is it important to consult primary sources about Indigenous cultures and histories that are self-authored?
3. What are some of the reasons why people migrate, emigrate, or immigrate? How would you feel if the government forced you to leave your home and live somewhere new and unfamiliar?
4. Why do you think Curtis framed his photographs so that evidence of modern life could not be seen? In your opinion, what are the benefits or consequences of his decision for the people he depicted?



From Copyright Photograph 1910 by E. S. Curtis

CHEYENNE MATRON

Edward Sheriff Curtis (United States, 1868–1952), *Cheyenne Matron*, 1910, photogravure on tissue, image: 7 $\frac{5}{16}$ × 5 $\frac{5}{16}$ in. (18.57 × 13.49 cm), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Mark and Pam Story (AC1997.271.31), digital image © Museum Associates/LACMA



From Copyright Photograph 1228 by E.S. Curtis

WATERPROOF PARKAS, NUNIVAK

Edward Sheriff Curtis (United States, 1868–1952), *Waterproof Parkas, Nunivak*, 1928, photogravure on paper, image: 7 1/16 × 5 1/2 in. (18.89 × 13.97 cm), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Mark and Pam Story (AC1997.271.52), digital image © Museum Associates/LACMA

The Parents, 1922–23 **Käthe Kollwitz**

Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) was a German artist best known for her prints (lithographs and woodcuts) and sculptures that explore emotionally charged issues such as war, poverty, injustice, and hunger. After she gained firsthand experience of the conditions of the urban poor at her husband's medical clinic in 1891, her interest in the struggles faced by disenfranchised communities became a motivating force. Around the same time, Kollwitz read the theoretical essay "Painting and Drawing" by artist Max Klinger, in which Klinger argues that the graphic arts (drawing and printmaking) are the most suitable artistic media for expressing social criticism and depicting difficult subjects. Shortly thereafter, Kollwitz created the print series *A Weavers' Revolt (1893–97)*, which depicts the 1844 uprising of Silesian factory workers in an empathetic and respectful manner. The work gained immediate recognition and firmly established her as an artist concerned with depicting the perspectives of the downtrodden.

When World War I began in 1914, Kollwitz wrestled with mixed feelings. She felt that it was her duty to support her country, "because there was the conviction that Germany was in the right and had the duty to defend herself." However, after her son Peter died while fighting on the western front in October 1914, she began to question her patriotic commitment. Kollwitz wrote in her diary, "My Peter, I intend to try to be faithful.... What does that mean? To love my country in my own way as you loved it in your way.... To look at the young people and be faithful to them." Kollwitz's words reflect her desire to continue supporting the people who were risking their lives in the war, despite her own personal feelings of grief and her growing belief in pacifistic alternatives.

Throughout the war, Kollwitz continued to develop ideas and sketches for artworks. Yet she struggled to create images that captured her own overwhelming

sense of grief and could speak to the pain felt by people around the world who had also lost loved ones to war and other acts of violence. By 1919 she had begun work on the series *Seven Woodcuts on the War (1923)*. While WWI survivors and casualties are the subject of the series (her son Peter appears in the print *The Volunteers*), Kollwitz used the raw, monochromatic simplicity inherent to the woodcut medium to create prints that appear timeless and put emotional trauma front and center. *The Parents* belongs to this series and communicates the unspeakable horror of losing one's child. In the print, a mother and father kneel on the ground, facing each other. They embrace tightly, their bodies seemingly becoming one single mass. In a letter she sent to a friend in 1922 (while she was still at work on the series), Kollwitz reflected on *Seven Woodcuts on the War*, writing, "these sheets should travel throughout the entire world and should tell all human beings comprehensively: this is how it was—we have all endured this throughout these unspeakably difficult years."

Discussion Prompts

1. How does Kollwitz use the elements of art (such as line, color, shape/form, texture, space, and proportion) to capture powerful emotions in *The Parents*? In your opinion, what parts of the figures' bodies express what they are feeling most strongly?
2. *The Parents* is a response to World War I from the viewpoint of those who have suffered loss. In what ways do you think the artist's personal experience of losing someone close to her in the war affected the way she depicted these figures?
3. Research other historical figures who were impacted by the war. How are their perspectives different from Kollwitz's? Explain how/why.



Käthe Kollwitz (Germany, 1867–1945), *The Parents*, 1922–23, woodcut on Japan paper, image: 13 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 16 $\frac{9}{16}$ in. (34.93 x 42.07 cm) irregular, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Robert Gore Rifkind Center for German Expressionist Studies (M.82.288.193c), photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

Newsboys, 1909

Gang of Newsboys at 10:00 p.m., 1910

Lewis Wickes Hine

While industrialization in the United States had the positive effect of lowering the cost of consumer goods and creating more jobs in urban areas, most factory owners and managers did not treat their employees respectfully. Millions of immigrants and rural migrants were forced to work long hours in dangerous and unhealthy conditions for little pay. Wages were so low that entire families—including children as young as six—went to work in the factories. Businesspeople viewed children as ideal workers: they could be paid even less than adults and their small hands and bodies made them adept at working in tight spaces and with small machine parts.

Language barriers, the absence of worker-protection laws, and employer hostility toward labor unions made it difficult for urban workers to gain widespread government recognition of their rights. However, they were incredibly persistent, drawing the attention of many other Americans who empathized with them and found ways to support their demands. Lewis Wickes Hine (1874–1940), a New York schoolteacher and photographer, is an example of someone who applied his knowledge and skills to the struggle for progressive change. Hine felt strongly about photography's potential as a tool for social reform, quitting his teaching job in 1908 to work for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), whose mission was to abolish child labor in the United States. The NCLC hired teams of investigators to gather evidence of children working in harsh conditions and then organized exhibitions with photographs and statistics to dramatize the plight of child laborers.

Hine's job required him to travel around the country photographing children working in a range of industries and environments including coal mines,

meatpacking houses, textile mills, and canneries. He also took pictures of children who worked in the streets as shoe shiners, newsboys, and hawkers. *Newsboys* (1909) and *Gang of Newsboys at 10:00 p.m.* (1910) document children in New York and St. Louis who sold newspapers day in and day out. Hine took *Newsboys* on the Brooklyn Bridge in New York at midnight using a flash. The weather appears to be cold: all of the boys are bundled up in jackets and caps, and the two boys on the right-hand side of the image foreground hide their bare hands in pockets or sleeves. The children in *Gang of Newsboys at 10:00 p.m.* worked in St. Louis, Missouri, miles from the newsboys in New York, but their working and living conditions were similar. The photo depicts eleven boys huddling around a campfire behind a billboard in an empty corner lot. Their shift may finally be over or they may just be taking a short break to warm up before returning to the darkened streets.

When possible, Hine conducted in-depth interviews with the children he photographed to learn more about their lives and leverage their humanity to appeal more strongly to the public. He believed that if people could see for themselves the abuses and injustice of child labor, they would demand laws to end it. To ensure that as many people as possible saw how deplorable labor conditions were, Hine and the NCLC distributed photographs far and wide. They sent large numbers of small contact prints to the press for publication in newspapers, created glass slides to project the images at lectures, and reproduced many photographs in books as well as in NCLC bulletins, reports, and pamphlets.

It took years for the federal government to pass laws that significantly curtailed workplace abuse of children. Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards

Act in 1938, which made most forms of child labor illegal. Much credit for the law's passing is owed to people and organizations like Lewis Hine and the NCLC, whose unflagging empathy for child workers spurred them to agitate for positive change.

Discussion Prompts

1. What do you think it means to empathize with people who lived in the past, with whom we can't actually speak? How can photographs help us empathize with other people and their unique circumstances? How does a photograph compare to text/writing that describes these conditions? Is one more effective than the other at fostering empathy? In what ways?
2. Do you think that Hine's experiences as a teacher had an influence on his perspective of child labor? Why or why not?
3. Hine often lowered his camera to photograph children at their eye level, rather than from above. Why do you think he chose that particular perspective?



Lewis Wickes Hine (United States, 1874–1940), *Newsboys*, 1909, gelatin silver print, image: 4% x 5% in. (11.11 x 13.65 cm), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Marjorie and Leonard Vernon Collection, gift of the Annenberg Foundation, acquired from Carol Vernon and Robert Turbin (M.2008.40.1042), photo © Museum Associates/LACMA



Lewis Wickes Hine (United States, 1874–1940), *Gang of Newsboys at 10:00 p.m.*, 1910, gelatin silver print, sheet: 4 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 5 $\frac{5}{8}$ in. (11.7 x 14.3 cm), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of an anonymous donor, Los Angeles (M.2000.174.16), photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

History as a Planter, 1961 **Edward Kienholz**

American artist Edward Kienholz (1927–1994) moved to Los Angeles from Washington state in 1953, joining a growing cohort of young L.A.-based artists producing assemblages (sculptural works of art made by putting together scraps or junk) and collages (works of art made by gluing pieces of different materials to a flat surface). Many artists, including Kienholz, incorporated junk into their art in order to connect with the public and with contemporary issues in a more immediate way. Kienholz's artworks often express a critical view of post–World War II America, which witnessed the growth of a robust middle class and an explosion in the production of consumer goods.

Kienholz's assemblage *History as a Planter* (1961) can be interpreted as a memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and a critique of Americans' tendency to forget or ignore this horrific genocide in the postwar era. A small electric oven with two doors comprises the artwork's base. LACMA currently exhibits the piece with the doors open, revealing the feet and lower legs of six mannequins jammed inside. When closed, a black swastika on the door frames becomes visible. Several items rest on top of the oven: a shallow aluminum box containing a spiderwort plant, commonly known as a Wandering Jew; a Jew's harp, a small instrument popular in many cultures and also called a jaw harp or mouth harp; and a framed newspaper clipping that references Erwin Rommel, a German WWII general who was once admired by many Americans for his bravado on the battlefield.

Placed alongside one another as parts of a whole, the individual components of *History as a Planter* take on new meanings. The oven and mannequin legs retain their associations to domestic life and consumer culture but also become easily recognizable symbols of unspeakable torture. On their own, the Wandering Jew plant and the Jew's

harp are also seemingly innocuous; when they are viewed within Kienholz's new context, however, they provoke audiences to reflect on how prejudice can become part of the fabric of everyday life, in the very names we use for things. His use of aesthetically displeasing, found, or discarded objects may also allude to the ways that both governments and citizens cast off entire groups of people, marginalizing their stories and essentially consigning them to the "dustbin of history."

Despite the artwork's overwhelmingly negative associations, there are also elements that imply Jewish strength and renewal. Spiderworts are incredibly resilient plants that can grow in many different environments. Kienholz chose to place the spiderwort on top of the oven—perhaps it can be said to grow out of the symbolic ashes beneath. At a time when Kienholz felt that few people were actively engaged in remembering the Holocaust, he created a poignant, critical, and literally *living* memorial to Jewish victims of persecution. Like memories as well as historical narratives, *History as a Planter* continues to grow and change.

Discussion Prompts

1. *History as a Planter* is a memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. Have you ever participated in a memorial event or visited a memorial? What kinds of objects and activities were involved? Are there any events or people to which you believe a lasting memorial should be dedicated?
3. Based on what we know about Kienholz's artistic practice and this particular artwork, it seems likely that he felt frustrated by his fellow citizens' ability to forget about the Holocaust. Can you empathize with Kienholz's perspective? Have you ever felt a similar sense of frustration about something?



Edward Kienholz (United States, 1927–1994), *History as a Planter*, 1961, wood, metal, paper, paint, soil, plant (Wandering Jew), and aluminum container, 33 x 18 ¹/₁₆ x 12 ⁵/₁₆ in. (83.8 x 47.5 x 31.4 cm), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, anonymous gift through the Contemporary Art Council (M.64.47) © Kienholz, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA