

KINRYŪZAN TEMPLE, ASAKUSA (ASAKUSA KINRYŪZAN)

1856, seventh month

From the series *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* (Meisho Edo hyakkei)

Utagawa Hiroshige

THE DANCERS

1898

Edgar Degas

Utagawa Hiroshige was a preeminent designer of landscape prints in nineteenth-century Japan. Kinryūzan Temple, Asakusa is included in *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*, an innovative series of prints the artist completed at the end of his career. In Kinryūzan Temple, Hiroshige employed a startling new compositional technique to depict Edo, the city of his birth, after nearly sixty years of living there. A large lantern hangs in the extreme foreground, so close to the picture plane that the entire object will not fit within our frame of vision, and its right side and upper portion have been cropped out. The lantern dominates the composition and, together with the edge of a screened in enclosure at the left of the print, frames a distant scene of trees and buildings that appear tiny by comparison. While the detailed foreground elements integrate viewers into the scene by giving them points of reference, they simultaneously create a sense of separation between the viewer and the world seen in the background, mimicking the effect of looking out a window at a far-off landscape.

Kinryūzan Temple depicts the temple complex of the Buddhist deity Kannon in Asakusa, a district of Edo (modern-day Tokyo). Dating back to 645, it is the oldest and most venerated Buddhist temple in the region, far older than the city itself. The red, two-story building in the distance is the great Gate of the Two Kings, the facade of which is mostly obscured by snow-covered trees, and a five-story pagoda can be seen at the right edge of the print. The viewer is positioned on the threshold of the famous Thunder Gate looking in, but the Main Hall of the temple is completely hidden behind the pagoda, our view of the Gate of the Two Kings is almost entirely blocked by trees, and all we see of the Thunder Gate is a partial view of its lantern (at the top of the print), threshold stone (at the bottom of the print), and railing (along the left side of the print).

Forty-two years later and on a different continent, French painter and draftsman Edgar Degas took inspiration from the prints of Hiroshige and his contemporaries in nineteenth-century Paris. In *The Dancers*, Degas employs a compositional technique similar to Hiroshige's to depict the conventional and very popular subject of dancers, placing the viewer backstage in the middle of the action but with only a partial view of the scene and no view of any actual ballet. The corner of a tutu and the edge of some wooded scenery in the extreme foreground frame the scene and make the viewer feel immersed in the tight quarters of backstage. Degas pushes this device even further, cutting off the head and knee of the ballerina on the far right. This innovative cropping not only invokes Japanese prints like Hiroshige's *Kinryūzan Temple* but also reflects the new medium of photography, seeming to capture a spontaneous moment—albeit one that was meticulously planned by the artist.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Create a postcard of your favorite place that doesn't actually show the most memorable or significant part of that place. How will you capture the feeling of your subject without revealing its main attractions?
- Utagawa Hiroshige designed the series of prints *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo*. Create another postcard of the place you chose earlier, but show it from a different vantage point. What elements are the same as the first print? What elements are different?
- Find an artwork from another culture in LACMA's collection that speaks to you. What drew your attention to the artwork you chose? What elements of this artwork would you like to incorporate into your artwork?



KINRYŪZAN TEMPLE, ASAKUSA

1856, seventh month

Utagawa Hiroshige

Color woodblock print

Image: 13 3/8 × 8 3/4 in. (33.97 × 22.23 cm); sheet: 13 7/8 × 9 3/8 in. (35.24 × 23.81 cm)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, promised gift of Barbara S. Bowman (PG.2012.21.49)

Photo © 2015 Museum Associates/LACMA



THE DANCERS

1898

Edgar Degas

Pastel on paper on board

29 x 24 in. (73.66 x 60.96 cm)

Frame: 36 x 30 x 2 in. (91.44 x 76.2 x 5.08 cm)

Partial, fractional and promised gift of Janice and Henri Lazarof (M.2005.70.21)

WEeping WOMAN WITH HANDKERCHIEF

1937

Pablo Picasso

Over the course of his career, Spanish painter Pablo Picasso went through Blue, Rose, Cubist, Neoclassical, and Surrealist phases, and dabbled in sculpture and design in addition to painting, drawing, and printmaking. Although he is best known for his more abstract paintings, Picasso was a skilled painter and draftsman who received a traditional training before developing groundbreaking new styles. This strong foundation and familiarity with art history allowed him the versatility to play with form and color with confidence, and to reinvent and be inspired by classical forms and subjects. In his own words, “Whenever I had something to say, I have said it in the manner in which I have felt it ought to be said. Different motives inevitably require different methods of expression.”

In April 1937, General Francisco Franco, with the aid of his German ally, Adolf Hitler, bombed the undefended town of Guernica in northern Spain. Although Picasso was living in Paris at the time, he read accounts of women and children shot down as they fled the burning buildings, and his mother wrote to him from Barcelona, also in northern Spain, telling him that the smoke from the burning city made her eyes water. Picasso’s response to the atrocity, a painting titled *Guernica*, is now one of the most famous depictions of war in the history of art, along with his Spanish predecessor Francisco de Goya’s *The Third of May, 1808*.

However, the subject of suffering continued to preoccupy Picasso after *Guernica* was completed. This preoccupation took the form of a single weeping woman who appeared in numerous drawings and paintings that year including this painting. The weeping woman was a personalization and manifestation of widespread despair. She was the grieving mother and the stunned survivor; and she was a symbol of Spain, Picasso’s home, which was being torn apart by civil war. Within a year of depicting his first weeping woman, Picasso had created nearly sixty drawings and paintings of her, changing forms, compositions, and styles in each iteration.

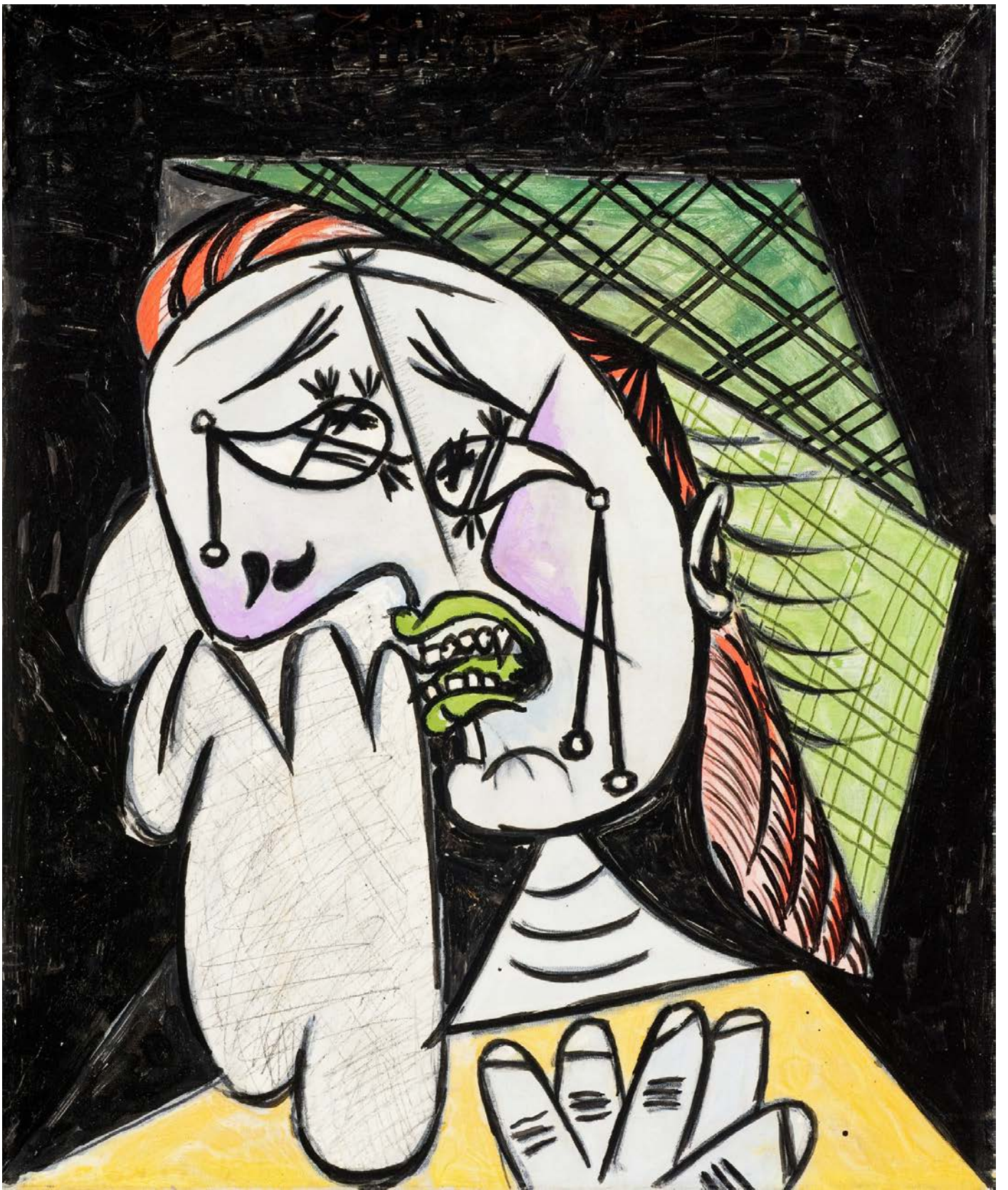
In painting this subject, Picasso drew on a long history of depictions of suffering in Spanish art. In many paintings and sculptures, especially those from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Virgin Mary was frequently depicted weeping while mourning the death of her son,

Jesus. Iconic seventeenth-century Spanish painters like Francisco de Zurbarán and Jusepe de Ribera used dark backgrounds—like the one that appears in Picasso’s *Weeping Woman with Handkerchief*—to depict saints who suffered in isolation, and in the nineteenth century Goya famously used a similarly dark palette in his bleak and haunting Black Paintings. The connection between Picasso’s painting and the history of Spanish art is further reinforced by the weeping woman’s mantilla—a veil or shawl draped over a woman’s head and shoulders, first worn in sixteenth century Spain, and associated with piety—and the hand fan, another element of traditional Spanish costume, formed by the woman’s fingers at the bottom of the canvas.

Picasso takes these conventions and distorts them with elements of Cubism and Surrealism. The woman’s tears hang from her eyes like chained beads, and her nostrils take the shape of tear drops. Eyelashes cling to her eyes in clumps and furrowed lines cut deep slashes down her forehead. Her nose and cheeks are flushed, not red but a sickly lavender, with crying, and her lips are the same putrid green as her mantilla, clashing with the red of her hair. This palette gives her an unnatural appearance that is reinforced by the gray-purple cast of her skin and the acid-yellow of her dress. A shapeless cloud of handkerchief frames her distraught face, floating like an empty speech bubble, and the folds of her neck radiate outward from her head like sound waves illustrating the wails emitted from the screaming mouth above.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- In *Weeping Woman with Handkerchief*, Picasso uses and distorts elements from historical artworks to help him express how he felt about contemporary events in Spain. Choose a topic or current event you feel passionate about. How could you use symbols or images associated with that topic, or the place/culture in which it is occurring, to make an artwork that expresses how you feel about it?
- What images do you associate with Los Angeles? How could you use these images to create an artwork that communicates your thoughts about current events in Los Angeles (for example, the drought, traffic, etc)?



WEeping WOMAN WITH HANDKERCHIEF

1937

Pablo Picasso

Oil on canvas

21 x 17 1/2 in. (53.34 x 44.45 cm)

Frame: 29 x 25 1/2 x 2 in. (73.66 x 64.77 x 5.08 cm)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mitchell (55.90)

© 2015 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

WEEPING COCONUTS (COCOS GIMIENTES)

1951

Frida Kahlo

Best known for her revealing self-portraits, Frida Kahlo suffered from debilitating pain stemming from a streetcar accident in 1925, when she was a teenager. Kahlo began painting during her recovery from the accident and continued under the encouragement of her husband painter Diego Rivera and the influence of their artist and intellectual friends during their stays in cities across America and Europe. Twenty-six years later, after seven operations on her spine and a prolonged hospital stay, Kahlo was discharged from the hospital, but she remained primarily confined to her bed, under the influence of strong painkillers and with full-time nurses attending to her. It was under these circumstances, toward the end of her life, increasingly uncomfortable and with her senses and skills dulled by pain and medicine, that she turned to still lifes like *Weeping Coconuts*.

Still lifes had traditionally been one of few acceptable genres for women painters because they were considered less important than landscapes and portraits and focused on tame domestic subjects rather than subjects outside the home.¹ On the surface, *Weeping Coconuts* is a very conventional example of this undervalued, lady-like genre. However, in Kahlo's hands, these otherwise common household objects become symbols of disturbing violence and turbulent emotions.

The most striking demonstration of such feelings is the personification of the coconuts, whose "eyes" (really stoma, or germination pores) emit tears of coconut water and seem to avert their gaze, hiding from the scrutiny of the viewer. Their husks resemble disheveled hair, and, depending on the viewer's perspective, the various fruits around them could either be forming a protective barrier between us and the coconuts, propping them up, or smothering them.

Rather than showing a placid assortment of fruit like those painted by her female predecessors, Kahlo depicts fruit that, like her, is wounded and suffering. In the words of her biographer, Hayden Herrera, Kahlo "probe[s] the insides of fruit and flowers, the organs hidden beneath

their wounded flesh, and the feelings hidden beneath stoic features." The papaya is sliced open, and both of the oranges in the foreground have been damaged: the one closest to the picture plane has been ripped into, revealing its insides, while the other has been punctured by a Mexican flag (without the eagle at its center). Like Kahlo herself, these fruits are native to Mexico, a fact that is highlighted by their colors, which echo the Mexican flag, and the inclusion of the flag itself in the center of the work. On the flag, Kahlo has included an inscription, "Pintó con todo cariño, Frida Kahlo" or "Painted with all my affection, Frida Kahlo." Originally this still life was intended as a gift for a friend, but the friend returned the painting, a deceptively simple depiction of fruit, because she found it unsettling.

¹ You can see an example of a seventeenth-century still life by a woman painter at collections.lacma.org/node/221448

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- What fruits or vegetables are native to your region? Create a still life using several native fruits and vegetables that reflect how you feel about where you live.
- Think of a typically disregarded or undervalued subject or art form (for example, motivational posters, children's cartoons, advertisements, objects from your daily life, etc). Brainstorm ways to use this subject or art form in a way that changes people's perceptions of it and makes a forceful statement.



WEeping COCONUTS (COCOS GIMIENTES)

1951

Frida Kahlo

Oil on board

Frame: 14 x 16 3/4 x 2 1/2 in. (35.56 x 42.55 x 6.35 cm)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Bernard and Edith Lewin Collection of Mexican Art (M.2004.283.2)
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New York, photo © 2015 Museum Associates/LACMA

UNTITLED (COMB)

1970

Vija Celmins

In the early 1960s, young Latvian American artist Vija Celmins began painting life-size depictions of the mundane objects in her studio. These paintings changed the context of these otherwise ordinary things and reframed them as serious, almost unfamiliar subjects worthy of great art. By the end of the decade, Celmins had expanded this theme, making sculptures of familiar objects related to her childhood such as puzzles, pencils, erasers, and this comb. Executed on a monumental scale, these renditions are both serious and playful, a tone inspired by the quiet deadpan of French artist René Magritte. Celmins was particularly inspired by the oversized comb from Magritte's painting *Personal Values*. In this painting, Magritte explained, the comb loses its "social character" and becomes a useless object, stripped of its function. Celmins's sculpture echoes this transformation; it plays with scale, depriving the utilitarian object of its intended use and repurposing it as art.

In discussing her inspiration for this piece, Celmins also credits memories of a comb her parents owned when she was a child. Celmins's childhood nostalgia is both relatable and complicated by the fact that her childhood took place in Latvia and Germany during World War II (she moved to Indiana with her family at the age of ten). In her words,

I missed my childhood. ...When I finally left my family and moved to Los Angeles to go to graduate school, I spent years working out my longing for that lost childhood. ...Because the first ten years of my life had been so dominated by the war in Europe, I found myself reaching back to it. I re-created the toys and puzzles and other things remembered from my school days.

Looking up at the oversize comb makes the viewer feels small. The distorted scale inspires a childlike sense of wonder and the mild confusion of seeing a familiar object out of context.

At the time the sculpture was conceived, Celmins was newly married, and the comb is the same height as her husband, perhaps bridging the gap between her old family and her new one. To make the sculpture, Celmins began by drawing the comb on a large piece of wood,

and then took the wood to a lumberyard, where workers roughly cut out the shape of the comb. Celmins then slowly filed and sanded the wood to create the teeth and desired texture before spraying it with lacquer to imitate the faux tortoiseshell exterior of her parents' comb. Finally, she had a friend paint on the name of the Swiss comb company, Balloid, together with the word "handmade." The sculpture took her two years, on and off, to complete.

This is not a decorative sculpture, and, despite its "handmade" label (and the fact that it is actually handmade), it maintains the cold look of a mass-produced object. Its position in a corner of the gallery, like the comb in the Magritte painting, lends it a sense of isolation that is reinforced by the inherent strangeness of a six-foot-four-inch comb. Thus an intimate item connected with one's daily routine acquires a newfound peculiarity and a (literally) heightened status.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- How can you challenge people to look at something they usually take for granted in a new way?
- Pick a favorite artwork on view at LACMA, then think of a way to reinvent it and make it your own by changing the context, medium, scale, or content.



UNTITLED (COMB)

1970

Vija Celmins

Enamel on wood

77 x 24 in. (195.58 x 60.96 cm)

Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Contemporary
Art Council Fund (M.72.26)

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LACMA