

# The Artist as a Social Conscience

## A Resource Guide for Visiting LACMA

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### About this Guide

This guide contains information and activities that will help you prepare for your students' visit to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). This guide includes:

- **Information about your tour and about LACMA**
- **Selected works of art with information, questions, and prompts:** These examples represent the types of art, method of discussion, and activities that your students will experience in the galleries. The artworks profiled in this guide may not be on view in the galleries during your tour.
- **Pre-visit activities:** In preparation for your trip, you may wish to use the featured works and discussion questions in conjunction with the activities listed in the "Before Your Visit to the Museum" section below.
- **Post-visit activities:** After your trip, extend learning with the activities suggested in the section "After Your Visit to the Museum."
- **Related California Standards:** All LACMA tours for students address Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and other California state standards.
- **Further Resources:** Use these resources in your lesson planning or share them with your students, as appropriate, to provide additional information and background.

### About the Museum

LACMA is the largest encyclopedic museum in the western United States with more than 100,000 works of art. Through its extensive collections, the museum is both a resource to and a reflection of the many cultural communities and heritages in Southern California. The collection includes artworks from various cultures from prehistoric to the present.

### About LACMA School Tours

Student experiences in the museum are grounded in close looking, inference, and inquiry. By closely examining works of art and inferring what is depicted based on observation, students construct their own understandings about works of art. LACMA docents are trained to facilitate discussion rather than lecture about facts and dates, allowing students the opportunity to share what they notice and therefore, what they are naturally interested in discussing. Docents will guide students to come to their own conclusions and use visual evidence to support their opinions. In this method of learning, rather than determining whether answers are "right" or "wrong," students discover the satisfaction of constructing meaning with their peers.

### Introduction to the Tour

All art was once contemporary and, as such, reflects the social and cultural context of its time. Whether depicting an actual historical event or dramatizing it, exploring a current topic or making connections between the past and present, artists can provoke viewers to reflect not just on what *is* happening in society, but also what *has* happened, and what *could* happen if history repeats itself. This tour explores how artists throughout history have used their artwork to give voice to and provoke dialogue about critical issues such as racism, class, gender, war, freedom, human dignity, ecology, and consumerism. This guide explores the following big idea question that relates to the tour theme – In what ways do artists convey what has happened and what could happen in society?

This tour is aligned with state content standards for history/social science for grades 8 through 12, visual arts standards for all grades, and Common Core English Language Arts standards for all grades.

## Before Your Visit to the Museum

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To prepare students for the *Artist as a Social Conscience* tour, you may wish to complete the following activities:

### The Artist's Message

Discuss a work of art that reflects a social, political, or cultural issue of its time, such as a work featured in this guide. After students share their initial observations, ask them what they think is the issue explored in the work. Ask students what they think the artist is conveying about the issue and how they think the materials selected for the artwork help communicate the message. Who would agree with the artist's message? Who would disagree?

### Art vs. News

Select a current social or political issue, such as a war in progress, border issues, or poverty. Find a photograph that portrays the issue in a news publication. Compare and contrast the photograph with a work of art, such as the examples included in this guide. Then lead a discussion about the differences between how photojournalists and artists communicate messages.

### News into Art

Tell students to select a current news article about a topic that they feel strongly about. Have them create a work of art inspired by the topic. Based on the article, students will select one person, place, scene, or symbol that they feel expresses their opinion about the article. Have them depict this image using the medium that they feel best expresses their message. Students will share their works of art with the class, explaining why they chose to depict a particular image and why the medium they selected was appropriate for the message they intended to convey.

## After Your Visit to the Museum

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Extend your students' learning after their visit to the museum with the following activities:

### One Issue, Many Perspectives

Have students work in teams of four. Each team should select a work of art that they viewed at LACMA. Tell students to research the issue or event that is explored in the work. Then each student will select one of the following roles:

- You are the artist.
- You are a journalist who has been reporting on the issue or event that the artist is depicting.
- You are a politician pushing for legislation that would greatly impact the issue.
- You are a person whose family has been greatly affected by consequences related to something depicted in the work of art.

Have the students imagine that they are on a panel in which the journalist is asking questions of the artist, politician, and family member. Give students time to craft the questions and develop responses from the perspective of each role. Have each group present their mock panels to the rest of the class.



***Cliff Dwellers***

GEORGE BELLOWS

(American, 1882–1925)

United States, 1913, Oil on canvas, 40 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 42 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.

Los Angeles County Fund (16.4)

<http://collections.lacma.org/node/228840>

# Cliff Dwellers

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## About the Work of Art

American artist George Bellows was a relatively young artist at the time he painted *Cliff Dwellers*, but the painting became one of the most celebrated in American art. This depiction of the Lower East Side of Manhattan conveys the lifestyle of the many immigrants that flooded American cities in the early twentieth century. The people are poor, living in cramped apartments, with too many children to feed; the children have the character of untrustworthy street urchins. Yet scenes such as this were not intended to be critical of foreigners of their living conditions; indeed, the activity has a lighthearted, almost circus-like quality.

Bellows chose a rough edged brush and a gritty palette to render the harsh actualities of people's lives. Yet sunlight illuminates a significant portion of the scene, especially the foreground group of young women and children. On the far left, the bright colors of a market cart attract the eye.

*Cliff Dwellers* reflects the changing social and economic dynamics of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century America. At this time, the United States was transforming into a modern industrialized society and an international political power. By 1920 more than half of the country's population lived in urban areas. Seeming to guarantee employment, the cities lured many farmers and African Americans from rural areas. In addition, between 1900 and 1920, 14.5 million immigrants from Europe, Russia, Mexico, and Asia settled in the U.S., primarily in urban centers. A new energy was channeled to such cities as New York and Chicago, as massive skyscrapers were erected to furnish much-needed office space and living quarters.

*Cliff Dwellers* represents the style of the "ashcan school," a group of artists in Philadelphia and New York who portrayed unidealized subject matter previously considered unattractive. Realists like George Bellows depicted the hustle and bustle of city streets, the common pleasures of restaurants and various forms of entertainment. During the 1910s and 1920s the realist celebration of America spread throughout the country, as artists recorded the neighborhoods and people that made their own cities distinct.

Adapted from "Cliff Dwellers" on the LACMA Web site at <http://collections.lacma.org/node/228840>.

## Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work using the following prompts and questions:

- Look closely at all of the details in this work of art. What do you see?
- What do you see in the foreground? Middle ground? Background?
- What words would you use to describe this scene?
- This painting was made in the early 20th century. What can you infer about what life was like in this part of New York at this time?
- How did the artist use color to help tell the story?
- How would you describe the mood of this painting?
- What did the artist do to create this mood?



***The Fall of Chinchow Fort***

KOBAYASHI KIYOCHIKA

(Japan, 1847–1915)

Japan, 1894

Triptych; color woodblock prints

Image: 14 <sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 28 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.; Paper: 14 <sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 28 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in.

Gift of Felix and Helen Juda (M.83.41a-c)

<http://collections.lacma.org/node/191211>

# The Fall of Chinchow Fort

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## About the Work of Art

In this woodblock print by Japanese artist Kobayashi Kiyochika, a battle scene during the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) is dramatized by shadows and aglow with the victories of war. The fighting takes place in the distant background with an orderly line-up of silhouetted Japanese soldiers combating an unseen enemy amidst the backdrop of smoke.

The Japanese troops had taken possession of Chinchow Fort in China on November 6, 1894, and shortly thereafter, the army set up headquarters there. On November 17, Japanese forces marched onward to the Chinese fortress and naval station of Port Arthur. They captured it on November 21, leaving behind a death toll of an estimated 60,000 Chinese soldiers and civilians.

Kiyochika's print spares viewers the bloodshed resulting from the devastating effects of war, and instead presents a romanticized version of wartime heroism at a safe distance, a fitting portrayal at a time of intense national patriotism. The outbreak of war with China spawned an incredible demand for illustrations of battles. In order to keep up with the demand, Kiyochika worked long hours into the night. Approximately 3,000 works by woodblock artists depicted images of the battlefield, and Kiyochika alone made over 70 triptychs.

Kiyochika made his first prints in 1876 at the age of 27, at a time when woodblock prints known for solid areas of multiple colors and strong lines called *Nishiki-e* ("brocade picture") were popular. Primarily a self-taught artist, Kiyochika's diverse body of work included Tokyo landscapes, night scenes, and comic satire as well as historical prints.

## Sources

Dower, John W. "Throwing Off Asia II: Woodblock Prints of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95)." *Visualizing Cultures*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. [http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/throwing\\_off\\_asia\\_02/toa\\_essay01.html](http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/throwing_off_asia_02/toa_essay01.html)

Inouye, Jukichi. *A Concise History of the War Between Japan and China*. University of California, 2007. Digitized 2007.

Smith, Henry D. *Kiyochika: Artist of Meiji Japan*. Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art 1988.

## Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work using the following prompts and questions:

- Look closely at all of the details in this work of art. What do you see?
- What do you see in the foreground? What do you notice about the figures?
- Which figure stands out, and why? Why might the artist want to draw attention to the figure(s)?
- What do you see in the middle ground? Background? How do the figures in the middle ground and background compare to those in the foreground?
- What words would you use to describe this scene?
- What do you think is happening?
- What do you think will happen next?

Share information about the battle that is being depicted in the print (see "About the Work"). Continue discussing the work using the following prompts and questions:

- Did any of the facts about the Sino-Japanese War surprise you? Why or why not?
- In what ways does this work portray an idealized version of war?
- How would you describe the mood of the print?
- What did the artist do to create this mood?
- Think of a wartime photograph of a battle that you have seen in news publications. How does this depiction of a battle compare with the photograph? Consider the portrayal of each side in the war, the mood, and the details that are revealed and are absent or hidden.



***Border Memory (Recuerdo de la frontera)***

BETSABÉ ROMERO  
(Mexico, born 1963)

Mexico, 2002, Bas relief on rubber, nine Oaxacan black-clay tiles

a) Tire width: 8 $\frac{3}{4}$  in., Tire diameter: 32 in.

(b–f) Rectangular tile: 5 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$  x  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. each; g–j), Curved tile: 10 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 5 $\frac{1}{2}$  x  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. each.

Modern and Contemporary Art Council Fund (M.2003.51a–j)

<http://collections.lacma.org/node/207046>

# Border Memory (*Recuerdo de la Frontera*)

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## About the Work of Art

Cars and car parts figure prominently in the art of Mexican artist Betsabeé Romero. Her attraction to cars lies not in their speed or sleek features but in their associations with wealth, status, pollution, and eventual decay or fragility. Her first work that incorporated an automobile was *Ayate Car* (1997), an installation of an old car that she covered with painted roses and stuffed full of 10,000 real roses and then positioned at the wall between the U.S. and Mexico in Colonia Libertad. The work functioned as a kind of offering for Mexicans who seek to cross the border, putting their lives in jeopardy for the possibility of greater opportunities in the U.S.

Romero's interest in exploring themes of human migration is also visible in *Border Memory (Recuerdo de la Frontera)*. In Mexico, tires are often recycled into foundations for homes in shanty towns or for shoe soles. Romero reclaims tires for a different purpose—to create art. The surface of the tire in *Border Memory* is carved with people holding hands while running.

Cars allow people to cross boundaries; however, their cost also establishes boundaries along class lines. Tires are symbols of movement but they also accumulate detritus and leave marks behind. Tires are able to roll over a variety of surfaces, but they also wear over time. In *Border Memory*, Romero captures the contradictory nature of cars and tires by depicting a trail etched with those who are not using cars for transportation. The fragility of tires is evoked in the use of black tiles made in the traditional Oaxacan style (referring to tiles made in state of Oaxaca in Southwestern Mexico that are known for their rich black color and polished surface). Pieces of black tile are aligned in the trail left from the tire's wake.

## Sources

Andriessen, Mischa; López, Sebastián; and Springer, José Manuel. *Betsabeé Romero: Cars and Traces*. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2010.

Zugazogoitia, Julián. *Betsabeé Romero: Lagrimas Negras*. Puebla, Mexico: Fundación Amparo, 2008.

## Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work using the following prompts and questions:

- Look closely at the work of art. What are your immediate observations?
- What details do you notice on the tires? What are the figures doing? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Cars and car parts are repeatedly utilized by the artist, Betsabeé Romero, in her work. What do cars mean to you?
- Consider a tire's shape, function, relationship to what it comes in contact with, and what happens to tires over time. What do you think the tire symbolizes in Romero's work of art?
- Why would the artist want to put figures on the bottom of tires?
- Consider the title for the work of art. How does the title affect your understanding of the work of art?
- What do you think the artist is communicating about the U.S.-Mexico border?





***History as a Planter***

EDWARD KIENHOLZ

(United States, Washington, active Indiana, Hope  
and California, Los Angeles, 1927–1994)

United States, 1961

Wood, metal, paper, paint, soil, plant (Wandering Jew)  
and aluminum container, 33 x 18 <sup>11</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 12 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.

Anonymous gift through the Contemporary Art Council (M.64.47)

<http://collections.lacma.org/node/234103>

# History as a Planter

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## About the Work of Art

American artist Edward Kienholz uses found objects culled from junk yards and automobile graveyards and incorporates them into works of art that comment on social and political issues—often in blunt and scathing ways. In *History as a Planter*, the artist packs an old oven with feet from mannequins and places several items on top of the oven: a Wandering Jew house plant, a Jew's harp, and a newspaper clipping that references the army of Erwin Rommel, a general under Adolf Hitler.

Directly referencing the Holocaust, Kienholz both memorializes those who were killed in concentration camps and reminds viewers not to forget history. As the title of the work implies, could historical events—even the most tragic ones—be as commonplace as a planter? Indeed, when the oven doors are closed, the lives that were lost are hidden within a piece of furniture like a guilty secret. Yet history is referenced through the symbol of the swastika, formed only when the doors are closed via the metal bands affixed to each door.

As a youth, Kienholz had gained experience with carpentry and engineering, skills that would prove useful in assembling his mixed-media works. In the late 1950s, Kienholz began making assemblages (a type of three-dimensional art consisting of an arrangement of diverse media, usually objects that are not commonly associated with traditional artistic media). In his assemblages, the artist allowed the former uses of the found objects to remain recognizable. He created meaning by juxtaposing different objects, allowing their time-worn surfaces to tell part of the story.

## Sources

"Kienholz, Edward." *Grove Art Online. Oxford Art Online*. Oxford University Press, accessed August 27, 2013, <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/To46502>.

Hopps, Walter. *Kienholz: A Retrospective*. New York, Whitney Museum of Art, 1996.

Los Angeles County Museum of Art. "Edward Kienholz: About this Artist." <http://collections.lacma.org/node/167461>

## Discussion Questions and Prompts

- Discuss the work using the following prompts and questions:
- Look closely at this work of art. List the objects that were used to create this work.
- What do the objects have in common?
- Why would the artist put mannequins' feet within the structure? What does this image remind you of?
- What do you think the household plant could symbolize?
- Imagine the work without the plant on top. What type of mood does the work evoke?
- The plant is a household plant called a Wandering Jew. How does the plant impact the mood or meaning of the work?
- This work was made sixteen years after World War II. Why might the artist be compelled to explore a subject that happened in the past?
- Consider the title of the work. Why do you think the artist selected this title?
- Imagine that the artist painted these images instead of assembling a work with found objects. How would that alter the meaning or your experience of the work?
- What does this work make you think about in relation to the Holocaust?

## Related California State Standards

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### California State Content Standards for Visual Arts

#### Grade 6

- Artistic Perception 1.2: Discuss works of art as to theme, genre, style, idea, and differences in media.
- Artistic Perception 1.3: Describe how artists can show the same theme by using different media and styles.
- Historical and Cultural Context 3.1: Research and discuss the role of the visual arts in selected periods of history, using a variety of resources (both print and electronic).
- Aesthetic Valuing 4.1: Construct and describe plausible interpretations of what they perceive in works of art.
- Connections, Relationships, Applications 5.4: Describe tactics employed in advertising to sway the viewer's thinking and provide examples.

#### Grade 7

- Historical and Cultural Context 3.2: Compare and contrast works of art from various periods, styles, and cultures and explain how those works reflect the society in which they were made.
- Aesthetic Valuing 4.2: Analyze the form (how a work of art looks) and content (what a work of art communicates) of works of art.

#### Grade 8

- Artistic Perception 1.1: Use artistic terms when describing the intent and content of works of art.
- Historical and Cultural Context 3.1: Examine and describe or report on the role of a work of art created to make a social comment or protest social conditions.
- Aesthetic Valuing 4.3: Construct an interpretation of a work of art based on the form and content of the work.
- Connections, Relationships, Applications 5.2: Create a painting, satirical drawing, or editorial cartoon that expresses personal opinions about current social or political issues.

#### Grades 9–12

- Artistic Perception 1.5: Analyze the material used by a given artist and describe how its use influences the meaning of the work.
- Creative Expression 2.6: Create a two or three-dimensional work of art that addresses a social issue.

### Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts—Grade 6–12

#### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard for Reading

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

#### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard for Speaking and Listening

2. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
3. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

## **California State Content Standards for History/Social Studies**

Note: The following standards may be addressed, depending on which works of art are selected.

### **Grade 8**

- 8.12: Students analyze the transformation of the American economy and the changing social and political conditions in the United States in response to the Industrial Revolution.

### **Grade 10**

- 10.8: Students analyze the causes and consequences of World War II.

### **Grade 11**

- 11.2: Students analyze the relationship among the rise of industrialization, large scale rural-to-urban migration, and massive immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe.
- 11.11: Students analyze the major social problems and domestic policy issues in contemporary American society.

### **Further Resources**

Center for the Study of Political Graphics.  
<http://www.politicalgraphics.org/home.html>

J. Paul Getty Museum. "Historical Witness, Social Messaging: A Curriculum for K-12 Teachers."  
[http://www.getty.edu/education/for\\_teachers/curricula/historical\\_witness/](http://www.getty.edu/education/for_teachers/curricula/historical_witness/)

PBS. *Art & Politics*  
<http://www.pbs.org/now/arts/artandpolitics.html>.

### **Credits**

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Editor: Sarah Jesse

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