

March 21, 2023–February 4, 2024
Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago

CALLING ON THE PAST

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SELECTIONS
FROM THE
COLLECTION

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

Drawing on the Smart Museum's permanent collection, *Calling on the Past* asks guests to reconsider the stories connecting the diverse selection of works on display. Instead of organizing the exhibition by region or chronology, curator Jennifer Carty pairs paintings, sculptures, and multimedia works together based on visual and thematic similarities. By challenging the traditions of museum displays and practices, this exhibition creates a visual experience that guides guests in forming their own interpretations of how art exists in a continual process of inspiration and development across time and space.



In this guide, we offer resources and discussions to prepare for your visit to the Smart Museum of Art (p. 2-3), and continue the conversations after returning to your classroom (p. 4-9). At the museum, students will be led in an inquiry-based exploration of the similarities and differences between works of art, while being encouraged to form and share their own interpretations and understandings of the pairings.

For more information on the exhibition and upcoming related events, visit: smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/exhibitions/calling-on-the-past-selections-from-the-collection

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

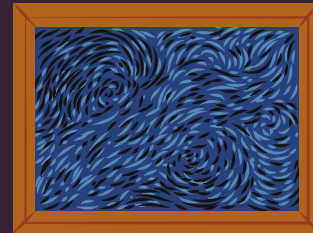
Understanding Museum Traditions

For some students, this may be their first visit to a museum. For others, a museum may be a space that has felt unwelcoming in the past. Because this exhibition challenges museum practices and appeals to a large audience, it is helpful to discuss what the traditions have been for presenting art in museums and how they can be changed.

Use the following questions to brainstorm with your students and start a larger discussion of how a museum functions.

What is a museum?

What types of museums are there? How are art museums different from science or history museums?



How is art organized?

Art museums have permanent collections, works of art that have been bought, gifted, and acquired that belong to the museum. Because the works in the collection are very diverse, museums organize their collection by time, region, and/or style.

Some examples for categorization of art include Medieval, Impressionism, Contemporary, Arts of Ancient Egypt, etc. What are other examples of categories for art?

What is the role of the curator?

Curators work behind the scenes of the museum, designing the exhibitions for museums. They are experts in specific regions or time periods, and they choose which works and decide how they are presented in the museum. While curators often follow the traditional geographical and chronological systems of organizing art, others work to reframe how art is thought about. They can present art in a way that opens new connections and conversations, making the museum a welcome space for many audiences. If you could design an exhibition, how would you organize the art?



BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Looking at Art

Ask your students, how do we look at and talk about art? Have a conversation with them acknowledging that understanding and interpreting art can feel intimidating, especially being in a museum space. It is important to remind them that there is no wrong response to art, even if they do not like the piece. Art is subjective and everyone's ideas and questions are valid and can change over time. We want you and your students to feel comfortable and confident talking about art with us.

To practice talking about art, show your favorite artwork to your students. Model an "I notice... I feel... I wonder" response to the art. Begin the conversation by asking them "What do you see? How does it make you feel?"

To further analysis, here are some examples of different perspectives and advanced questions to use to think about art. We don't need to ask every question for every work we see, but they are good tools to have on hand if your students ever feel stuck. Some questions may require more research, such as reading the wall labels next to a work of art to learn more information about the artist, materials, and context.

FORMAL QUALITIES

-What colors are used? Shapes?
Texture?

-What is the emphasis or focus? How can you tell?

-What mood and feeling do these visual
elements create?

-What material is this piece made of?
What feelings do these materials evoke?

-How would the artist have manipulated
the materials? What might the creative
process have looked like?

MATERIAL + PROCESS

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

-What was happening in the world when the
artist made this piece? Could the piece be a
response to personal or world events?

-Who was the intended audience?

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

-Does the subject of the work remind you
about your life or the society you live in?

-What is the artist trying to communicate?
What can you learn from the message?

-What does the title make you think of?
Does it accurately represent the work?

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

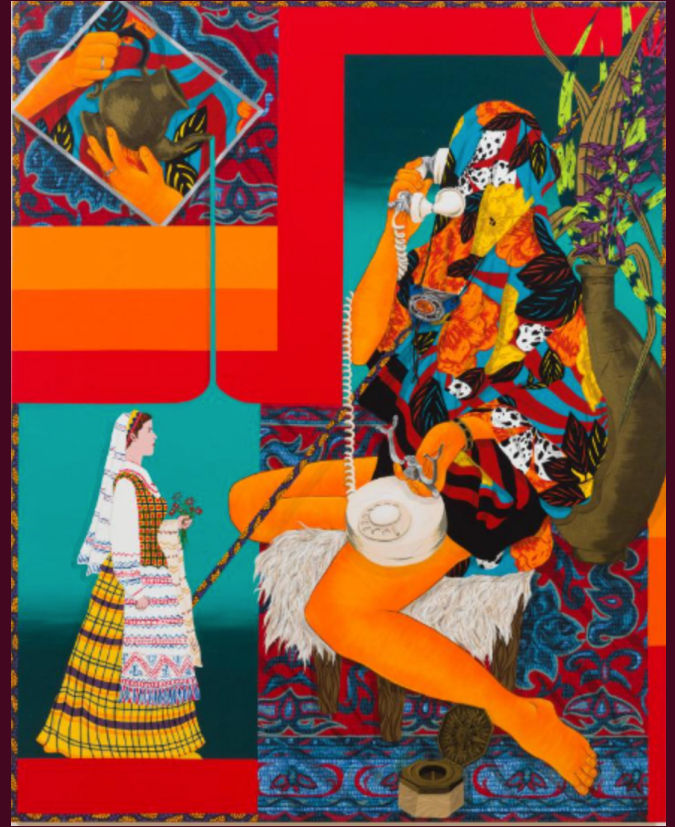
PORTRAITS + IDENTITY

Click the painting's title for a higher resolution image



Hans Fechner, *Agnes Samson*, 1896

Oil and pastel on canvas board. Gift of Mr. W. R. Magnus, 1983.116.



Amir H. Fallah, *Calling on the Past*, 2018

Acrylic on canvas. Gift of the 2018 Northern Trust Purchase Prize, 2018.46.

Created over a century apart, this pairing raises questions about the shift from classical portraiture to a broader exploration of cultural identities and personal style.

Further Discussions

Level 1: Discuss posing in portraiture and the effect of body language.

Level 2: Compare the role of color and pattern in both portraits and the narrative each creates.

Level 3: Predict how the artists' intents and purposes for their paintings differ from each other.

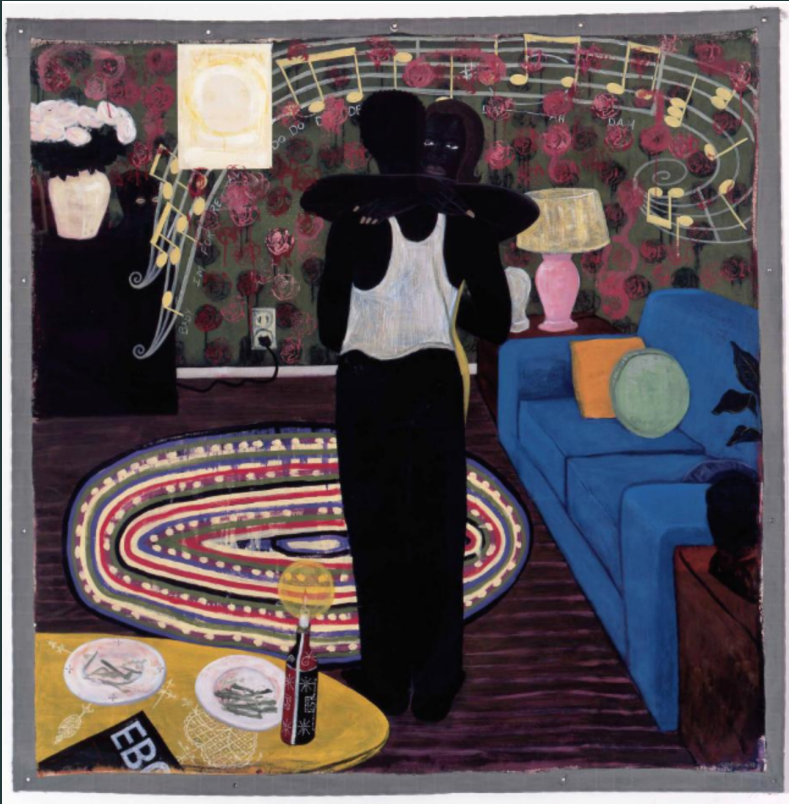
Activities

- Write a dialogue between the figures in the two portraits. What stories do they tell each other? What are their personalities?
- Reflect on the parts of your identity you would want expressed in a portrait. Create a backdrop using colors, forms, and patterns you associate with that identity.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

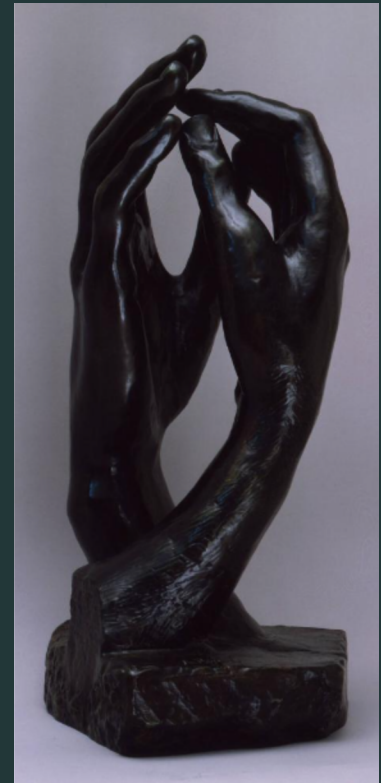
SPACE + INTIMACY

Click the painting's title for a higher resolution image



Kerry James Marshall, *Slow Dance*, 1992-93

Mixed media and acrylic on canvas. Purchase, Smart Family Foundation Fund for Contemporary Art, and Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions, 2004.23.



Auguste Rodin, *The Cathedral*, 1908

Cast bronze. The Joel Starrels, Jr. Memorial Collection, 1974.165.

Both painting and sculpture in this pairing capture movements of intimacy and love, with the deep black color in both works calling attention to the representation of black love in art history.

Further Discussions

Level 1: Describe the actions of the figures and hands. Infer what the relationship between the figures is.

Level 2: Compare the materials of both works (unframed painted canvas and bronze) and the feelings they create.

Level 3: Analyze the titles and their connotations. Argue if the titles accurately capture the mood of the works.

Activities

-What song do you think is playing while the figures dance? Write down the feelings and moods of your chosen song. Listen to "Baby I'm for Real" by The Originals. Compare the effects of the two songs.

-Cut out shapes from black paper. Manipulate the cut-outs on a flat surface so that they are all touching. See what shapes you can create with the negative space.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

EXPRESSION + SPIRITUALITY

Click the painting's title for a higher resolution image



Mark Rothko, No. 2, 1962

Oil on canvas. Gift of Mrs. Albert D. Lasker, 1976.161.



Luca Cambiaso, Madonna and Child with St. John the Baptist and St. Benedict, c. 1562

Oil on wood panel. Gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, 1973.50.

Rothko was inspired by the spiritual experience of seeing religious Renaissance art. The contrast in this pairing of abstract and figurative art raises questions about how feelings can be expressed in art.

Further Discussions

Level 1: Discuss the visual similarities and differences in color, composition, and style.

Level 2: Analyze the curator's choice to pair these two works.

Level 3: Imagine Rothko had chosen different colors for this piece, such as blue, black, and white. Speculate if the relationship between this pairing would change.

Activities

-Make a list of associations you have with the deep purple and red colors in both works. Write a story or poem with the colors as characters.

-Like Rothko, choose a feeling or experience you want to capture in art. Decide on a few colors that represent the chosen feeling and create an abstract composition.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

ABSTRACTION + PROCESS

Click the painting's title for a higher resolution image



Helen Saunders, *Balance*, c. 1915

Graphite and gouache on wove paper. Purchase, The Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions and with a donation from Lorna Ferguson and Terry Clark in honor of Richard Born, 2009.32.



Lauren Quin, *Godwink*, 2022

Oil on canvas. Gift of Antonio Valverde, 2023.1.

Both paintings are an abstract exploration of color, movement, and energy of modern times. The geometric shapes in *Balance* contrast with the organic forms of *Godwink*.

Further Discussions

Level 1: Describe what shapes and objects you see in the abstract works.

Level 2: Compare the intensity of color and lines and the effect each creates.

Level 3: Imagine how each artist created the work, if it was planned or intuitive, neat or messy. Reflect on how that compares to your own creative process.

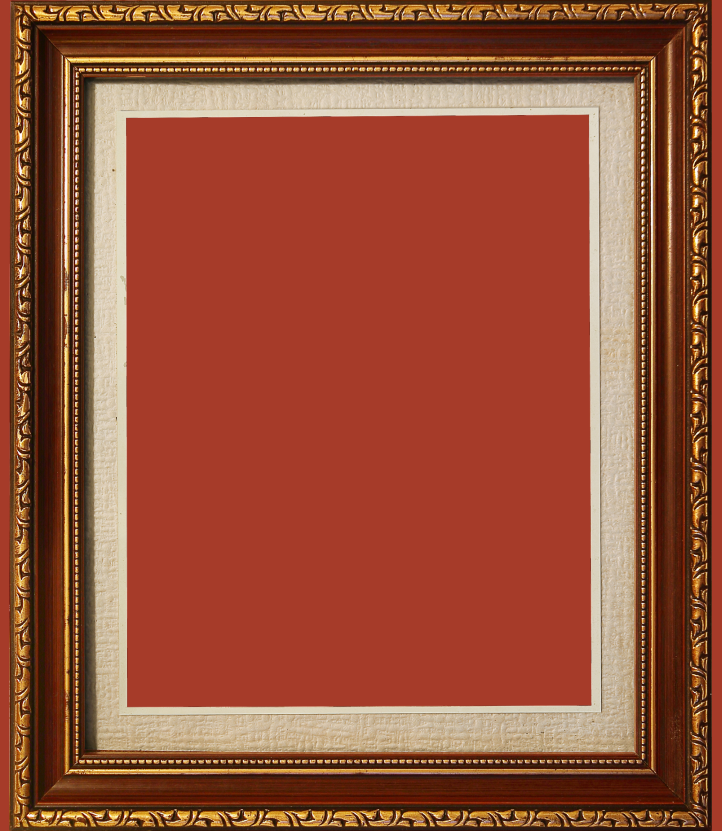
Activities

-Imagine yourself inside either of these paintings. Write a short story about the objects and living things you would find in either world.

-Create a colorful abstract background on a paper. Cover completely with black paint or crayon. When dry, use a toothpick to scratch out shapes and lines. Try creating and layering both geometric and organic shapes.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

CREATE YOUR OWN PAIRING



As a whole class, in pairs, or as an individual activity, have students choose two different works of art. They can be from any medium, time, or region, but should have a connecting thread, such as a theme or style.

Using what they've learned about ways to look at and connect art, have students discuss the similarities and differences between the chosen works. Their analysis can be shared in conversation or recorded in a Venn diagram. Older students could do more research about each work and write a joint museum label.

This exhibition has shown us that artists have been inspired by each other throughout history, whether in style, themes, or content. Let your students take inspiration from one or both of the artists in their chosen pairing. Give them as much guidance as needed to create a work based off the pairing, such as a drawing, painting, sculpture, or a creative writing response such as a poem, story, or song.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This Educator's Guide was produced by Jessica Keane, Museum Educator, with the support of the Public Practice team: Nicole Bond, Dorian Nash, and Erik Peterson.

Calling on the Past was curated by Jennifer Carty, Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

Support for *Calling on the Past* has been provided by the Smart Museum's Joan & Stanley Freehling Fund for Arts, Helen and Jack Halpern Fund, Janis Kanter and Thomas McCormick Endowment, Eloise W. Martin Fund, Inge and Edward Maser Memorial Fund, and the Museum's SmartPartners.



Scan for access to the Smart Museum's collection page to see all works currently on view.

Smart Museum of Art

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smartmuseum.uchicago.edu

