

North American Arts and Artists (in-person tours)

Observe how artists tap into their unique heritages to illustrate life and culture in North America through time. Through these diverse perspectives, explore engaging stories shown in a range of media and materials. *(For ideas of Native American artworks to include on your North American tour, see Native American Arts tour topic materials on the guide website.)*

ARTWORK 1: Aztec (Mexico), Mexico, North America, [Chalchiuhtlicue](#), 1200–1521

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. The Aztec Empire had 5 to 6 million people and controlled most of southern Mexico before the arrival of the Spanish to North America; the Spanish then conquered and colonized the region. This stone sculpture is thought to depict an Aztec goddess, either Chalchiuhtlicue or Chicomecoatl. Both of the goddesses are symbols of fertility, and a sculpture like this one would have been the focal point of a shrine.
2. Chalchiuhtlicue (Chal-chee-oot-LEE-kway) is the Aztec or Mexica (meh-SHEE-kah) goddess of water and wife of rain god Tlaloc (TLAH-loak). Chalchiuhtlicue is identifiable by her distinctive wide headband with large tassels.
3. She stands in a powerful and steady pose. Her pose, standing with her hands extending outward as if she were holding something, is typical of the corn goddess Chicomecoatl (Chee-koh-may-KOH-atl). As Chicomecoatl, she would have likely held small ears of corn, which are now lost.
4. Precious stone or shell was once inlaid into her eyes, the incisions in her cheeks, and the cavity in her chest. She is made of gray basalt, a hard volcanic stone, but the artist colored it with red ochre, a natural mineral.

Suggested Questions/Activities (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Spend a moment looking at the sculpture of this goddess. How has the artist made her look powerful?
2. How might you describe the pose in which she stands?
3. Sometimes we know someone famous just by seeing their outfit or characteristics (like we know it is Batman because of his outfit and mask). It is a bit of a mystery whether we are looking at Chalchiuhtlicue, goddess of water, or Chicomecoatl, goddess of corn. What might be some visual clues to her identity?
4. (For older students) Both corn and water were necessary to the Aztecs' survival. What are some things we need today to survive in our world today?

Research resources:

Mia website

[Aztec water deity](#), Met Museum

[Aztec Art \(Chicomecoatl iconography\)](#), Fordham.edu

[Introduction to the Aztec \(Mexico\)](#), Khan Academy

ARTWORK 2: Artists, Rosaura Munoscano; Emiliana Alcazar; Soledad Santaella; Mexico, [Wall hanging with embroidered samplers](#), 1810-1861

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Samplers are embroidered textiles that include a “sampling” of stitches and designs. The samplers help show off the skill of the artist with the needle and thread. Samplers may also tell a story or record information. Typically, young women made samplers as they learned sewing skills.
2. This hanging is made of nine separate Mexican samplers. Someone collected all these and stitched them together like this over a hundred years ago. We know some of the names of the women who made these (Rosaura Munoscano, Emiliana Alcazar, and Soledad Santaella) because they signed their names in the samplers. These samplers were made from 1810 to 1861.
3. If you look closely, you will see many identifiable images and letters or words. Some of the images sometimes reveal the Spanish empire in Mexico (the double-headed eagle which derived from the heraldry of the Spanish Habsburg rulers) or the Catholic faith of the maker (angels, the Lamb of God, a haloed Virgin Mary, and the monograms of Mary and Jesus Christ). Other images show animals, birds, and flowers.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. What is the first thing you notice when you look at this wall hanging?
2. How many colors can you find?
3. Explain what embroidery is. Ask students to look closely and find something they think would have been very hard to embroider. Why? What do they think was easy to embroider? Why?
4. Imagine you have to embroider a wall hanging to display in your school or classroom. What are some images or words you would want to put on the hanging?
5. (For middle or high school students) In the 19th century, skills like sewing were gendered, meaning that either men or women learned a certain skill, based on their gender. Do we have any skills today that you think are gendered? How might our world have changed? Are there ways in which we have not changed?

Research resources:

Cora Ginsburg LLC (auction house): https://www.coraginsburg.com/SN1246_detail.html

[Mia website](#)

From the V&A Museum, [Embroidery – a history of needlework samplers](#)

ARTWORK 3: Rufino Tamayo, Mexico, [The Family](#), 1936

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Rufino Tamayo was a Mexican painter who lived through the Mexican Revolution. He did not like all the divisions or destruction in the Revolution and chose not to paint political themes. Instead, he focused on providing a sense of the universal--or something everyone could relate to--through his use of color, shape, and form.
2. Tamayo was influenced by European art movements like Cubism and Surrealism, but he used those styles on themes and subjects from his own Mexican culture. He preferred a limited color palette, and he especially liked using shades of reds and purples.
3. The painting depicts a family. We see a mother, father, and child. They seem to be standing in front of a window with a view to another building.
4. This is a figurative painting, meaning we can identify the forms as people and see other recognizable objects (such as the back of the chair in front of the mother). With the influence of Cubism, Tamayo has made the faces and bodies of the people more abstract, with blocky areas of color and shading. The people are also dressed very simply.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. (VTS) Spend a moment looking at this painting. What's going on? What do you say that makes you say that? What more can you find?
2. What did Tamayo paint realistically? What areas of the painting are not realistic?
3. Spend a moment looking at the painting. Where do you see the color red used? What other colors do you see?
4. What kind of mood or feeling do you get from the family here? What do you say that makes you say that?
5. (3rd to 5th grade) Role play. Act out the poses of the family. Some students volunteer to take the poses, while the other students are "directors" and check that the actors match the poses. For those who posed as one of the family, how did standing in the pose make you feel? For the directors, did they gather any new thoughts or ideas about the family from the activity?
6. Tamayo wanted his art to be universal, or something everyone could relate to. Show of hands for those who think he accomplished that goal with this painting. For those who thought he did, why do you think that? For those who think he didn't, why do you think that?

Research resources:

Rufino Tamayo, biography and artworks: [The Art Story](#)

Rufino Tamayo: [Wikipedia](#)

Smithsonian exhibition with video: [Tamayo: The New York Years](#)

Artwork 4: Aslak Lie; Sponsor: John Eriksen Engesaethe, [Cupboard](#), 1870

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This brightly-painted cupboard belonged to a Norwegian-American family. Because it was so decorated and colorful, it would have been placed in the living room of the family, so guests could see and admire it.
2. The writing on the cupboard tells us that it was made as a gift to celebrate the marriage between John Eriksen Engesaethe and Brithe Grindhe in 1870 (150 years ago). We believe a Norwegian-American cabinetmaker named Aslak Lie (pronounced LEE) made this.
3. American art reflects many different cultural heritages or ethnic identities. In the 1800s, this is how Norwegian people painted their furniture. Even though the writing on the cupboard and the painting style is Norwegian, the people who owned it were Americans, and they lived in Wisconsin. Their families and the artist who made this cupboard had emigrated from Norway to live in the United States. This cupboard was a way for them to display and honor their cultural heritage in their new American home.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. (For students Pre-K-4) Play the [Elaboration Game](#), starting from the top, then middle, then lower. (See who can spot the lions!)
2. (Grades 3-6) What are some thoughts on what kind of things might be stored in this cupboard? Do we have any visual clues from the size or construction of it to help us understand how it was used?
3. How is this similar to furniture today? How is it different?
4. (Thumbs up/down) How many of you would want this in your own home? Why or why not?
5. If you moved to another country, what would be something you would want to take with you or make for your new home, to show your own heritage or culture?

Research resources:

Research article on Aslak Lie from the University of Wisconsin: [Aslak Lie Cupboard](#)

From the Sons of Norway, an article on [Rosmaling \(or Rose painting\)](#)

Wikipedia: [Rose painting](#)

From the Wisconsin Historical Society: [Rosemaled Norwegian Immigrant Trunk](#)

From Encyclopedia Britannica: [Norway](#)

ARTWORK 5: Gallery 323, [various American landscapes](#)

On this stop, make use of the entire gallery or one full wall. Landscapes and natural resources are the focus, as they inspired the artists to represent the land and sea. This gallery allows for student agency (choice) in selecting a landscape/seascape that interests them.

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. North America is a continent filled with diverse lands, from deserts to mountains to forests to prairies. In this gallery, many natural environments within North America are represented.
2. Artists often are inspired by the natural world and their environments to create paintings known as landscapes and seascapes.
3. Natural resources are materials or substances such as minerals, forests, water, and fertile land that occur in nature. North America contains many natural resources people use to build their communities and support life within those communities.

Suggested Activities/Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look around (the gallery or one wall) and choose a landscape or seascape that you like. Go stand/sit in front of your chosen painting and spend a minute looking at it. What do you like most about your painting?
2. What kind of animals or birds might live in this type of landscape?
3. (Pair share) Imagine you are in the scene you chose, walking along or sitting still. Pretend you are writing a postcard to a friend. What are the things you see, hear, or smell, and how do you feel being there?
4. (Grades 4 and up) What are some ways we protect our natural environment today? What more can we all do to protect our environment?
5. If your painting was the cover for a book, what would be the title of the book?

Research resources:

From Mia Teaching the Arts, [Five Facts: American scenes](#)

From the National Geographic Society: [North America: Resources](#)

From the Getty Museum: [Brief History of the Landscape Genre](#)

From the Princeton University Art: [‘Nature’s Nation’: How American art shaped our environmental perspectives](#)

ARTWORK 6: Tony Berlant, "[Pacific](#)" from the Tzedakah Box series, 1998

Tzedakah (pronounced tze-DA-ka)

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Tony Berlant is an American artist. He puts many small metal pieces together, overlapping them at time, to make collages. Here Berlant has nailed metal scraps and printed cutouts of tin onto a plywood form of a house. He uses hundreds of tiny thin nails to attach the colorful metal pieces. (Note: Mountain Journey, located in our lobby, is also a work by Tony Berlant and uses the same techniques of construction.)
2. Americans have many different faith traditions, and this artwork connects to the Jewish faith (Judaism). The artist is of Jewish heritage. This is a Tzedakah box, and it reflects one of the most important commitments of Judaism, when Jewish people give donations (money) anonymously for other people or organizations in need of help. They would put their money through the slot on the box, whatever they could afford to give, and when the box was full, all the money in it was given to those who needed it most. The word Tzedakah is Hebrew, meaning righteousness and justice. Jewish people believe it is good and right to give what you can to help others.
3. Usually, the Tzedakah box is rather plain. You will find these boxes in Jewish synagogues, homes, or other institutions. Berlant has created a colorful box that gets your attention, and you notice images as well as colors collaged on to the form of the house when you look closely.

Suggested Activities/Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Take a moment to look at the box from where you are standing. Have students share from different vantage points some details they see from where they stand (colors, textures, or images).
2. "Giving without receiving" means you are generous and give something to others without expecting to receive any reward or acknowledgement for your gift. What are some reasons it is good to help others?
3. Many cultures and religious faiths value generosity and compassion for those in need. What are some ways in which you are generous or help others?
4. (For K-2 students) Compare this box with the other box in the display case. What are similarities? Differences? Which do you prefer (thumbs up/down). Why?
5. Why do you think the artist made this in the shape of a house? What can a house symbolize?
6. (Middle School/High School) Why is it important for us as a community to respect the different religious faiths and customs of all people?

Research resources:

Wikipedia: [Tony Berlant](#)

Artsy.net: [Tony Berlant: 51 artworks](#)

From the Los Angeles Magazine: [Artist Tony Berlant and Daughter, Comedian Kate Berlant. Get Personal](#)

Tzedakah boxes, New York Times: [A History of Giving](#)

ARTWORK 7: Edward K. Thomas, [View of Fort Snelling](#), c. 1850

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Edward Thomas was a white American soldier and artist who worked at Fort Snelling. In his spare time, he painted scenes of the land and people around him, recording what this land looked like in the 1850s.
2. Fort Snelling is located on the first Native land taken over by whites in the region of Minnesota. It was built to secure the land for colonization as people moved from the East Coast to the West in the United States, displacing the Native peoples who lived in Minnesota. Here, the Dakhóta people are soon forced to move away from their homeland.
3. Pictured are the tipis of the Dakhóta people, the houses of white families who worked for the American Fur Company, and Fort Snelling, a military base where soldiers lived.
4. Fort Snelling overlooks a sacred place for the Dakhóta people, the Bdote (buh-doe-tay), or place where the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers come together. The Dakhóta believe all land and water are sacred, and that human beings hold responsibilities to one another, to the land, and to the water at places such as Bdote. "With over 10,000 years of human history, this is a place where complex stories of many peoples converge."(MNHS)

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. VTS: What is going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What else can you find?
2. How does the Fort compare to the houses and the tipis? What is similar? Different?
3. Why do you think the rivers were important to the Dakhóta people and the white settlers who came to Minnesota?
4. In this painting, we have many stories being told. We have the story of the artist, who is watching the scene and painting it, the story of the Dakhóta dancers, the stories of the onlookers, and the stories of the people who live in the houses and the fort. Whose story would you like to know more about? Why?
5. Use the Three Whys routine with middle school/high school students: Why might this matter to me? Why might this matter to Minnesotans/my community? Why might this matter to the world?
6. (High school students) How might your identity impact how you relate to this painting? How might you feel if you are Dakhóta? How might you feel if you are White?

Research resources:

From Mia's Teaching the Arts, Artwork in Focus: [View of Fort Snelling](#)

From the Minnesota Historical Society, [Historic Fort Snelling](#)

Also from the Minnesota Historical Society: [Edward K. Thomas, Fort Snelling Artist](#)

From Marlena Myles, artist: [Dakota Land Map](#)

Project Zero: [The Three Whys](#)

ARTWORK 8: James Phillips, [Cosmic Connection](#), 1971

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. James Phillips is an African American artist and educator who also is known for his public murals. His work focuses on color, light, and rhythm, giving visual form to sound. His art also is influenced by his African heritage, and he is associated with the artist collective AfriCobra.
2. In *Cosmic Connection*, Phillips is influenced and inspired by jazz, particularly the music of John Coltrane. Phillips created this painting as a backdrop for a memorial concert in 1971 honoring Coltrane. He wanted it to be an uplifting visual in connection to Coltrane's music and soul.
3. This painting has an enormous presence in the gallery, at a little over 17 feet long, filled with bright colors and rhythmic shapes. Looking closely, you may be able to see loose impressions of musicians and musical instruments, like saxophones. Much like jazz, the paintings' shapes and colors weave together to make a complex and engaging composition.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. If this painting could make sounds, what do you think you would hear? What do you say that makes you say that?
2. Ask the students to line up along the painting. Take a moment to look at the painting, and think of one word OR sound you would use to describe it. Starting at the left side, work along the line, asking students to say their word OR make a sound they think they see in the painting.
3. (Older students) Why do you think the artist called this painting "Cosmic Connection"?
4. The more you look at the patterns in this painting, the more you start to see. Within the painting seem to be loose impressions of faces and instruments. Ask the students to point out what they see; what more can they find?
5. (Pair share) This painting was created to honor a jazz musician. Think of your favorite singer or musician. Imagine you are an artist. What kind of artwork would you create to honor them?

Research resources:

From New Door Creative: James Phillips: ["The Shape of Things to Come"](#)

[A short video and interview with James Phillips](#), from The Studio Visit

[New to Mia](#) (scroll down to see *Cosmic Connection*)

[Online copy of UMUC James Phillips Exhibition](#), 2017. Published on Apr 25, 2017

ARTWORK 9: Luke Anguhadluq, Canada, [Hunting Caribou from Kayaks](#), 1976

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Luke Anguhadluq was an Inuit artist who lived in the Canadian Province of Nunavut, near the Arctic Circle. For much of his life, he was a hunter and camp leader, living off the land. This meant that Anguhadluq's community relied on the land and water to provide food as well as all the materials for shelter, clothing, and tools that were needed for living. His community lived in balance with the land.
2. In the late 1950s, the migration routes of the caribou changed, causing famine among the Inuit. He and his family had to relocate to Qamani'tuaq (Baker Lake). It was there, at the age of 73, that Anguhadluq started drawing. In his art, Anguhadluq focused on the daily and ceremonial life of the Inuit, full of culturally important details from his years observing and participating in community life and living off the land. He died in 1982, at the age of 87.
3. In this drawing, Anguhadluq shows us a caribou hunt. When caribou migrate, they sometimes cross large amounts of water. The Inuit were then able to hunt the caribou from their kayaks. Here we see a birds-eye view, with four tents to the right that depict the Inuit campsite. Four hunters in kayaks are shown paddling towards the caribou herd.
4. Hunting Caribou from Kayaks is a print that was made from Luke Anguhadluq's original drawing. Members of the Baker Lake community, such as Anguhadluq's sons, learned printmaking and would translate his drawings into prints. Making a drawing into a print meant they could make multiple copies of it for sale to people and galleries.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Spend a moment looking at the print. VTS: What is going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What else can you find?
2. Luke Anguhadluq spent much of his life living off the land near the Arctic Circle, which meant that humans relied on the land and water to provide food as well as all the materials needed for living. What would be challenging living in such an environment? How do our lives today compare?
3. What do you think the hunters in the kayaks felt, as they approached the caribou?
4. Why do you think some of the caribou are blue, rather than gray?

Research resources:

Artist biography from Inuit Art Foundation: [Luke Anguhadluq](#)

Mia label: [Hunting Caribou from Kayaks, 1976](#)

Wikipedia: [Luke Anguhadluq](#)

Fehely Fine Arts: [Luke Anguhadluq](#)

ARTWORK 10: Christi Belcourt, [It's a Delicate Balance](#), 2021

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Christi Belcourt is a Métis visual artist with Michif heritage. She lives and works in Canada. For most Indigenous communities, all life— plants, animals, insects, microbes— are living relatives, and to be treated with respect and care. Most of the living beings that Belcourt depicts here are currently threatened, endangered, or at the edge of extinction in the Upper Midwest. Each of these species is critical for the balance of our ecosystem, interconnected to all of life, including humanity.
2. From far away, notice the symmetry in the painting as you see dozens of living creatures and plants reflected on both sides. Moving closer, you see that this whole picture is painted with tiny dots of colorful paint.
3. Belcourt paints these creatures as if she were beading them on hide, starting at the bottom and drawing upon designs and motifs found in Michif beadwork. Each dot is painted individually, representing a single bead. The composition of the painting is a seamless whole. Her work shows careful observation of the natural world.
4. Belcourt hopes we will remember the interconnected nature of existence on this planet and treat all living things with respect, living sustainably with the resources we have. She states “This wondrous planet, so full of mystery, is a paradise. All I want to do is give everything I have, my energy, my love, my labor—all of it in gratitude for what we are given.”

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. As you approach the painting, look at it far away, asking what students notice. Then move closer and ask them what they now see.
2. (Younger students) Pretend you are holding a paintbrush. Using your imaginary brush, show how the artist painted this picture.
3. Christi Belcourt uses her art to make people stop and think about the living environment around us and how to better protect it. What are some things you or your school does to protect and respect the environment?
4. (Older students) Belcourt says, “This wondrous planet, so full of mystery, is a paradise. All I want to do is give everything I have, my energy, my love, my labor—all of it in gratitude for what we are given.” What does the earth provide for us? What are you grateful for? What concerns do you have about the future of our planet?

Research resources:

Mia label: [It's a Delicate Balance](#)

On the Mia Guide website, search for Belcourt for PDF of all the flora and fauna in the painting.

Smithsonian artist profile: [Christi Belcourt's The Wisdom of the Universe](#)

Video: [Metis Artist Christi Belcourt Discusses Painting "My Heart is Beautiful".mov](#)

[Multisensory Moments: Christi Belcourt's Wisdom Of The Universe](#) (video from Art Gallery of Ontario)

Additional options (theme of storytelling or artists' inspirations)

Clementine Hunter, [Picking Cotton](#), 1950s

Delita Martin, [The Soaring Hour \(Self Portrait\)](#), 2018

Martin Wong, [Polaris](#), 1987

Nick Cave, [Soundsuit](#), 2010

Tsistsistas (Cheyenne) or Lakǎ́óta, [Headdress](#), late 19th-early 20th century

Nellie Two Bear Gates, [Suitcase](#), 1880-1910

Jeffrey Gibson, [What We Want Is Free](#), 2020

Cy Thao, [#48](#), 1993-2001 (and others from this series)

Nopiloa (Veracruz), [Figure \(Ballplayer\)](#), c. 600-750 CE

Marcia Marcus, [Renoir](#), 1968

Martin Parr, [Untitled \[Minneapolis. Winter Games. Ice Fishing\]](#), 2012