

Art and Activism

Middle school students and older; choose works that are age-appropriate

Tour description

Discover how art focuses on issues, communicates multiple perspectives, and asks challenging questions. Learn how artists use their voices and imagery to inspire activism and bring about social change. Examine how artists invoke empathy, which involves looking outside ourselves and trying to identify with the experiences of others.

Sources for social justice curricula - many websites contain helpful information:

<https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/social-justice-resources/>

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/frameworks/social-justice-standards>

This tour incorporates a historical and contemporary look at artists' activism. Encourage students to express multiple perspectives about the works, how they could relate to our lives today, and to share what role they think art and art-making can play in social activism.

ARTWORK 1: Morris Topchevsky, *Strike Breakers (Company Violence)*, 1937, Oil on canvas, 2018.69.2, Gallery 377

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Morris Topchevsky created art to forthrightly protest discrimination, oppression, poverty, and intolerance, conveying his conviction of the power of art to improve society.
2. His family emigrated to the U.S. to escape anti-Jewish violence; 4 of his siblings perished in massacres of Jewish people.
3. Many U.S. workers formed unions in the 1930s to improve working conditions that included long hours with inadequate pay and often a lack of safety measures. We have unions to thank today for many of the work benefits we enjoy: vacation and sick pay, federal safety legislation, living wages, etc.
4. This painting depicts a clash in 1937 between union workers occupying a factory in Waukegon, IL (outside Chicago) and police officers sent to break up the strike. The Fansteel Metallurgical Corporation refused to deal with the union. After a week-long standoff, the workers were gassed out of the building and arrested.

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

1. What type of mood has the artist created in this scene? How do the colors he used contribute to that mood?
2. Unions were formed to give workers some say about and control over their working conditions. Who do you think is in control in this situation? What do you see that makes you say that?
3. How do you react to what is happening in this picture?
4. What imagery would you use to convey your commitment to a social issue that you think needs examination?

ARTWORK 2: Gordon Parks, [Untitled, Harlem, New York](#), 1963 (printed 2020), Archival pigment print, 2020.55.3, Gallery 365

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Gordon Parks, one of the greatest photographers of the twentieth century, was a humanitarian with a deep commitment to social justice. He documented American life and culture from the early 1940s into the 2000s, with a focus on race relations, poverty, civil rights, and urban life. Parks interacted with many of the leading people of his era—from politicians and artists to athletes and other celebrities.
2. This is a photograph of a protest against police violence held in New York City days after the shooting of 7 black men in Los Angeles. Parks's images convey the determination and vision of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.
3. Parks shows key moments in the struggle for Black liberation and anti-racist efforts in cities across America. He created sensitive, memorable images of adults and children exercising their right to free speech that reveal the resilience and humanity of Black Americans at a pivotal moment in history.

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

1. Describe the types of emotions you see on the faces of the people in this photograph.
2. Look at the newspaper headline, "Our freedom can't wait!" How do you respond to this headline in 2022, almost 60 years after the photograph was taken?
3. Compared to a painting such as Topchevsky's, in what ways do you think a photograph can more effectively capture the feeling of a moment? What do you see that makes you say that?
4. How do you think Parks has used the camera as "a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs"?

A related Gordon Parks photograph; there are also other examples that may come on view when these are not:

[Untitled \(Watts, California\)](#), 1967 (printed 2020), Gelatin silver print, 2020.55.2, Gallery 365

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Parks was the first African American staff photographer for *Life* magazine. He worked at the magazine for two decades, taking memorable pictures of such figures as Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and Stokely Carmichael. His images helped rally support for the Civil Rights Movement, for which he was a tireless advocate and documentarian.
2. This photograph, taken in Watts (a neighborhood of Los Angeles), serves as a reminder of an uprising that occurred there in August of 1965. The arrest and alleged abuse of a young black man by a white policeman was followed by six days of civil unrest, with many deaths and extensive property damage.

3. The photograph shows a young man and woman who are part of a rising generation of Black social activists during the 1960s. A picture of the activist Malcolm X is printed on their sweatshirts. (See below for background information on Malcolm X.)

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

1. Pick one of the people: How would you describe the emotions and attitudes of this person?
2. Malcolm X is a hero to these young activists. Who inspires you to work for social justice today?
3. The photograph depicts an older man with two young people. What role do you think young people can play in bringing attention to social issues?

Malcolm X was killed 2 years before this photo was taken. Born Malcolm Little, he became an African-American Muslim minister and human rights activist who advocated for black empowerment and separation of black and white Americans. He criticized Martin Luther King, Jr. and the mainstream Civil Rights Movement for its emphasis on nonviolence and racial integration. Although controversial, Malcolm X is also widely celebrated within African American and Muslim American communities for his pursuit of racial justice. Hundreds of streets and schools in the U.S. have been renamed in his honor. (Source: Wikipedia)

ARTWORK 3: Cy Thao, United States, #48, 1993–2001, Oil on canvas, 2010.55.48, not on view (from a series of 50 paintings that document the Vietnamese immigrant experience; any of the series on view could be used)

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Cy Thao was an important activist in the Hmong community who used art to express his perspective on participation in American life and politics. He served in the Minnesota House of Representatives from 2002-2010.
2. He was born in Laos in 1972, but traveled to Thailand with his family in 1975 after the United States' withdrawal from the American war in Vietnam. His family stayed in a Thai refugee camp until 1980 when they immigrated to St. Paul, Minnesota.
3. The fifty canvases in *The Hmong Migration* comprise an epic narrative that recounts over 5,000 years of Hmong history -- from life in southern China and the mountains of Laos, to alignment with the U.S. during the Vietnam war and life in the refugee camps in Thailand, to resettlement in the United States. Thao's intent in this series was to expose the difficulties, menaces, and effects of any migration process.
4. Cy Thao chose an "outsider" narrative style, mirroring the story cloth tapestries he saw being made in Thai refugee camps during his childhood. He said they were like picture books without words. He stated his goal for this work: "I want the series to educate the younger generation, to have some closure with the generation that went through the war, and hopefully become a historical document for generations to come."
5. Cy Thao added a written commentary about each image. Here is his comment on painting #48: "While there are negative effects there are also positive ones. The young are grasping and learning American ideas fast. Many are using their skills and knowledge to help and speak for our community."

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

1. What emotions are the young people expressing?
2. What is the perspective of the protesters?
3. Cy Thao's paintings are reminiscent of and inspired by Hmong story cloths and storybooks for children. Why do you think Thao chose this style?
4. This painting was inspired by a protest in 1998 after KQRS, a radio station in Minneapolis, aired racist comments by Tom Barnard, a local "shock jock." Cy Thao mentioned that while he and many of his younger generation took to the streets to voice their opinion, the older Hmong population didn't in fear of being kicked out of Minneapolis. Why do you suppose people of different generations had differing reactions?
5. Cy Thao created this series of 50 paintings to depict the history of the Hmong community. How do you think this work compares to a history book or an oral recollection of events?

Research resources:

<https://new.artsmia.org/stories/cy-thao-explains-how-he-created-his-epic-50-painting-series-on-hmong-history-and-why>
<https://www.mnvtiam.org/story/minnesota-legislator-and-painter-cy-thao/>

ARTWORK 4: Kevin Pourier, Oglala Lakota, *Mixed Blood Guy*, 2009, Buffalo horn with mineral inlay, 2011.49, Gallery 259

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Kevin Pourier carved a traditional ladle from a black buffalo horn and added his self-portrait, wearing his signature hat and sunglasses. He used natural minerals mixed with resin to color the surface. Pourier has single-handedly revived Plains traditional buffalo horn carving while reflecting contemporary issues and his own personal perspective. He visited the National Museum of the American Indian's vast collection and studied carved buffalo horns that were created over 100 years ago.
2. The monarch butterfly above his head, which appears in many of his artworks, came to him during a Lakota ceremony. He uses butterfly imagery as a reference to Lakota beliefs about the connection of all beings. Pourier says: "We have to commit to conservation for the survival of nature. My whole life as an artist has been committed to studying and paying attention to everything they do in their lives... I have changed peoples' minds about these small and large beings and made them see the importance of their part in the whole scheme of things."
3. Pourier created this work to reveal his complex feelings of identity, belonging, and disconnection. On each side of his portrait, hands in two different colors point at him. The red shaded hands represent fellow Native Americans from his community and the white colored hands represent Euro-Americans. As a "Mixed Blood Guy," part Native American and part Euro-American, Pourier illustrates that he is often stuck in the middle between these two communities, with each side unwilling to accept him completely.
4. Plains people survived on hunting, and the bison was their main source of food. The Lakota first name is Buffalo People (a name used for the American Bison). Bison were the chief source for items made from their flesh, hide and bones, including food, cups, decorations, crafting tools, knives, and clothing. Bison horn was used to make tomahawks and war clubs, drinking vessels, spoons, spinning tops, and other toys.

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

1. Look at the statements and pointing fingers on the sides of the bison horn. What is Pourier telling us about himself?
2. Pourier draws inspiration from traditional Native American utilitarian objects while carving the surface to address contemporary issues about identity and belonging. How has he combined traditional and contemporary issues in his work?
3. A wing of a butterfly can be seen in the band of his hat, and acts as his personal glyph; another butterfly flutters above him. The butterfly represents the Lakota belief of "All my relations"--we are all connected. How do you think Pourier's use of the monarch butterfly in his work relates to his activism around caring for the environment and all beings?
4. What symbol might you use to represent a social issue that you care about?

Research resources:

Kevin and Valerie Pourier's website: <https://www.kevinpourier.com/buffalo-horn-spoons>
[Video of the artist](#), from Nelson Atkins Museum of Art

ARTWORK 5: Bisa Butler, [*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*](#), 2019, Cotton, wool, and chiffon, quilted and appliquéd, L2021.199 (promised gift; no website link yet)

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This artwork is named after writer Maya Angelou's 1969 memoir, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou's story of transformation from seeing herself as a victim of racism to a self-possessed, dignified young woman capable of responding to prejudice. Bisa Butler alludes to this work of literature to underscore her desire to show us remarkable, yet often overlooked, individuals whose stories have resonance with contemporary Black lives. The central metaphor of a bird struggling to escape its cage refers to lessons learned about resisting racist oppression.
2. Butler's portrait quilt is based on a photograph from around 1900 of four women seated on the steps of a building at historically Black Atlanta University, founded in 1865. Generations of students earned bachelor's degrees there and became teachers and librarians across the South. The quilt captures the persistence of women who earned college degrees during an era of racial discrimination. Many Black artists worked as teachers while pursuing artistic careers, including Butler, who taught for 13 years as she established herself in the art world.
3. Originally trained as a painter, Butler shifted to textiles to add dimension and vibrancy that she found lacking in her paintings. She layers fabrics as a painter layers glazes, and uses thread to draw, adding detail and texture. Fabrics offered her a practical way to pursue artmaking while pregnant and after her daughter was born. Textiles also connected with her family history; she had learned to sew at a young age from her mother and grandmother.
4. Butler says the people in the photographs capture her attention: "You'll notice in my works that people usually look directly out and at you. That kind of gaze stops me too, and I get thinking, 'What is this person about?'" She looks for clues: what they're wearing; what they might be doing. At first she might only know the year the photograph was taken.
5. Butler's activism brings attention to ordinary people in historic photographs who can help us think about questions such as: "What was the state of life for the average Black person? What was happening in the country around that time? How did that impact this community?"

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

1. How do the women's gaze and posture convey their strength and confidence?
2. What does the use of brightly colored quilted fabrics add to the image? By connecting her early sewing lessons with her formal studies, Butler found her artistic path. She also describes herself as a "daughter of Gee's Bend," highlighting the impact the Gee's Bend quilters have had on her practice. (Show supporting examples from Mia's collection.)
3. Resilience and persistence are characteristics Butler repeatedly examines in her work. She taught for 13 years as she established herself in the art world. What does that say about her?
4. What photographs do you have in your family that show people who endured challenges to make a better life for their descendants?

ARTWORK 6: Shahzia Sikander, [Arose](#), 2020, Glass mosaic with patinated brass frame, 2021.10, Gallery 243

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Shahzia Sikander wants to challenge and reinvent classical Indo-Persian miniature painting (show an example from Mia's collection) by changing the scale and materials used in such works. She challenges the strict formal rules of the genre by enlarging the scale and using various media including mosaics and metals. She sees herself informed by multiple voices from South Asian, American, Feminist, and Muslim perspectives.
2. Women in traditional miniature paintings typically are portrayed in roles designed to serve and please men, often by performing for them. Here, Sikander challenges that notion by depicting mirror versions of the same woman whirling around in a pinwheel that she says represents "the enormous possibility of the feminine spirit."
3. The lush skirts can be read as a poppy blossom, alluding to the opium industry in Afghanistan and the long-term U.S. intervention and conflict there. In this way, Sikander alludes to the power imbalances among countries related to migration, trade, and empire-building. (See below for more information.)
4. The ravishing circular composition "also looks like a bombed-out site to me," says Sikander, who likes to play with multiple meanings simultaneously and create tension between beauty and destruction.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. What materials does Sikander use? How does her use of mosaic and brass change the way we look at this work, compared to a painting?
2. Show an image of a Persian miniature, a traditional form of painting that was used and adapted by Indian artists. How does Sikander's use of large scale change the way we think about this image?
3. What does the circular/pinwheel form suggest to you?
4. Women in Persian miniatures are depicted according to a stereotype—as dancers, as objects of desire. How has Sikander changed the way we look at these women?

Only a few species of poppies produce opium. A bud develops at the tip of the plant and blossoms into a flower with four petals in a variety of colors. The petals fall away to reveal a green pod that continues to grow to the size of an egg. Inside the pod is the ovary that produces opium. Opium can only be produced during the 10-12 day period when the pod is ripening. Many Afghan farmers choose to grow poppies, rather than the agricultural goods needed to feed the people. Poppy pods bring a better price on the market, based on the demands of the global drug trade.

Sources: US Department of Justice, "Opium: A History" by Martin Booth; "Unholy Wars" by John Cooley

ARTWORK 7: Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, [Frankfurt Kitchen](#), 1926-1930, Kitchen cabinetry and stove, 2004.195, Gallery 378

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. After the First World War, an ambitious citywide housing project was carried out in Frankfurt, Germany. A young but experienced Viennese architect, Grete Schütte-Lihotzky (1897-2000) was hired to help design low-income housing for some two million soldiers returning to Germany following the 1918 Armistice, as well as thousands of war widows.
2. Schütte-Lihotzky studied home design reform to create a kitchen that was efficient, space-saving, and easy to clean. Versions of the design were installed in 10,000 integrated housing units during a four-year period. Each element of the kitchen was carefully determined to minimize unnecessary steps, provide labor-saving devices, and increase physical comfort.
3. The kitchen's many innovative features include integrated units, continuous work surfaces, and a worktable for preparing food under a large window next to the sink (both set at a convenient height for use while seated). Other features include labeled storage bins with handles and spouts for pouring dry baking staples, movable ceiling light and stool, built-in dish rack, concealed pass-through to the dining room, drop-down ironing board, and cabinets painted deep blue to naturally repel flies. The old-style, dirty wood-burning stove is replaced with a modern electric version.
4. Schütte-Lihotzky was one of the first female architects in Austria and was active in the anti-Nazi resistance. She was probably the first female student of the school now known as the University of Applied Arts, Vienna, studying under architect/designer Josef Hoffmann. These designers were dedicated to the artistic production of utilitarian items to modernize and improve home life. The Frankfurt Kitchen offers us insight into a design-based functional home workspace.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Think about the kitchen in your house. How is this kitchen different?
2. Watch some of the video next to the kitchen and notice improvements the kitchen's design brought to domestic chores. What do you notice that would save time and make those chores more comfortable?
3. Why do you think efficiency of time and motion was emphasized?
4. Pair share: Pick a room in your house and discuss with your partner how you would change it into a better living or working space. Have volunteers share their ideas with the group.

ARTWORK 8: Christi Belcourt, [It's a Delicate Balance](#), 2021, Acrylic on canvas, 2021.30, Gallery 259

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Christi Belcourt is a Métis visual artist with Michif heritage who 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 dozens of living creatures and plants reflected on both sides. Moving closer, you see the whole picture is painted with tiny dots of colorful paint. 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. Her work shows careful observation of the natural world.
3. Belcourt wants us to see 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.”
4. Belcourt believes that artists can play a role in social awareness and change: “I think art is a vehicle and it is powerful in its ability to communicate what, sometimes, plain words cannot. Art can be used to seek justice and raise awareness so that change can happen. So the role of the artist is not only as an artist, but as a leader.”

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at the painting, *It's a Delicate Balance*. What is your eye drawn to first? Keep looking. How do your eyes move around the painting? What else do you notice?
2. Think about Belcourt's technique of using thousands of dots to emulate Michif beadwork. How do you think this technique relates to her theme of the interconnectedness of the natural world?
3. 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. 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?
5. Belcourt believes that artists can be activists who use their work to seek justice and raise awareness so that change can happen. She focuses on endangered plants and animals to examine issues related to the environment, climate change, and potential species extinction. What type of art would you make to make people aware of social justice issues that are important to you?

Research resources:

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)

ARTWORK 9: Monks of the Gyuto Tantric University, Tibet, [Yamantaka Mandala](#), 1991, Colored silicate and adhesive on wood, 92.44, Gallery 277

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Sometimes activism takes the form of spiritual practice. The making of a mandala, a visual representation of the sacred Buddhist universe, is an active expression of a spiritual practice used in meditation and initiation rites. The act itself is believed to benefit all beings. It is created in a time and space of ritual prayer, music, and performance.
2. Making a mandala of this size requires people to work together with patience, resolve, and cooperation. A team of Tibetan monks-in-residence at Mia created the mandala in 1991 over a period of four weeks. They drew an outline of the design, then patiently filled in each small area with colored sand, slowly tapping the sand out of a metal funnel into the design.
3. This mandala is a blueprint of the heavenly palace of the deity Yamantaka, Conqueror of Death. The mandala is filled with symbolism relating to a person's journey to enlightenment. The blue square at the center represents the attainment of nirvana, the highest level of existence, with a vajra (thunderbolt) and lotus pedestal representing Yamantaka. The 4 colors radiating from the center blue square represent the 4 directions, ending in the 4 gates to the palace. The very outer rim represents our world, filled with violence and decay. The symbols in the 4 corners represent the senses: hearing, taste, smell, and vision.
4. Typically, at the completion of its making, a sand mandala is destroyed by sweeping away the sand into running water. This reminds everyone how nothing in life is permanent. This mandala was made with a special sand developed by 3M which could be fixed after it was applied. The Gyoto monks and Mia preserved it in order to honor the 1.2 million Tibetans who lost their lives to political-religious persecution during the 20th century.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Take some time to look at the mandala. What are some symbols or images you recognize? What are you curious about?
2. The Tibetan monks who made the mandala identify with the values and beliefs of Buddhism, helping them to work together as a team. In what ways does your faith or community influence or impact your actions and beliefs?
3. Tibetan monks believe that their thoughts, words, and actions influence the well-being of the universe and all living beings. How could you use your thoughts, words, and actions to help others?
4. Typically, a sand mandala is destroyed after it is made. Imagine you have spent weeks perfecting such a design. What is your reaction to having it all swept away?

Research resources:

From *Buddhism Info* website: [Buddhist Sand Mandalas – Why do Monks Create, Then Destroy Them?](#)

Yamantaka Mandala meaning: [Archived Arts of Asia](#)

Other possible works and brief explanation:

Claude Monet, [Grainstack, Sun in the Mist](#), 1891, Oil on canvas, 93.20, Gallery 355

Impressionist artists rebelled against the art establishment in making works of art that captured images of current life instead of historic and mythological subjects. With loose brushstrokes and many colored daubs of paint, Monet showed the effects of reflected light, atmosphere, and weather on surfaces, replacing the highly detailed and finished surfaces of Academic artists. The transformative work of the Impressionists, highly criticized in its time, has become one of the most beloved art periods in the world.

Avis Charley, [Think Long. Think Wrong](#), 2021, Oil on canvas, 2021.80, Gallery 259

Dakota/Dine artist Avis Charley portrays strong, resilient, and independent Indigenous women in modern settings. Growing up, Charley yearned to encounter paintings made by and for Indigenous people in museums; instead, she found romanticized and often inaccurate portraits of Native people painted by non-Native artists. This led Charley to paint accurate representations of Native people living in the contemporary American landscape to inspire present and future generations and to broaden perspectives for general audiences.

Henry Moore, [Warrior with Shield](#), 1954, Bronze, 54.22, Gallery 371

While serving in World War I, Henry Moore experienced the deaths of more than half of his London regiment in one battle, partly as a result of the use of mustard gas by German troops. His experiences changed his stance on military conflict and significantly shaped his subsequent work. The abstracted, mutilated body of a warrior fighting to the end creates an emotional response in us. Moore's work comments on the horrors of modern life and the destructive power of humans; he includes aspects of war that are difficult to see and contemplate. He uses his art to reflect his opposition to war as a tragic means of resolving conflict among nations.