

Art and Identity (in-person tour)

Gain insights into the expression and impact of identity through sharing our diverse perspectives while examining art. Consider how art reveals varied stories, life experiences, and memories.

This tour asks the question “What influences or informs our identities?” then uses various lenses to explore those influences through art.

ARTWORK 1 (Biological/Physical): Egon Schiele, [Portrait of Paris von Gütersloh](#), 1918

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Egon Schiele was an Austrian artist who rebelled against the conservative art of his time. He was an Expressionist, meaning he used the formal elements of art (color, line, texture, form) to express emotion. He died at the age of 28 in the flu pandemic of 1918.
2. Schiele was a friend of Paris von Gütersloh. Gütersloh was a painter, writer, actor, producer, and stage designer, who wrote the first study of Schiele’s art in 1911. Schiele admired his friend and wanted to picture him as a creative genius.
3. The portrait of Paris von Gütersloh seems to pulse with energy, tied to the dynamic line and brushstrokes. His hands are raised in a conflicting gesture, with one hand seeming to draw the viewer closer and the other seeking to keep the viewer away. His eyes are wide open, and his gaze is intense. His seated pose is not relaxed.

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

1. Spend a moment looking at the painting. What mood or emotion does this portrait convey? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. What conclusions do we draw about someone’s identity (or characteristics) based on what we see?
3. (Pair share) If Paris von Gütersloh could tell you a little bit about himself, what do you think he would say?
4. Have people ever assumed something about your identity, based on what they see? How did that make you feel?

Research resources:

[Mia label](#)

A photo of Paris von Gütersloh from Neue galerie: [Paris von Gütersloh](#)

[Egon Schiele biography and artworks](#), from The Art Story

[Nine Things You Didn’t Know about Egon Schiele](#), Google Arts and Culture

ARTWORK 2 (Family): 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/Activities (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 kind of mood or feeling do you get from the family here? What do you say that makes you say that?
3. (Pair share) Thinking of your own family, what family members have influenced or impacted your identity?
4. (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?

Research resources:

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

Rufino Tamayo: [Wikipedia](#)

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

ARTWORK 3 (Friends): Mimi Gross, [Bagno a Ripoli \(Firenze\)](#), 1961

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Mimi Gross is an American painter who focuses on figurative art, painting colorful portraits of her friends, family, and community. She continues to work from her studio in lower Manhattan.
2. In this painting, she shows herself (second from the left) with her boyfriend Red Grooms, to her left, and her friends Katherine Kean, Nello Falteri, and Pete Stanley. These five friends had just finished a summer-long adventure in 1961, traveling from Florence to Venice, Italy in a horse-drawn carriage and stopping at villages along the way to stage puppet shows.
3. The scene captures the end of their Italian adventure, and they are celebrating together with an outdoor meal in Florence, in a neighborhood called Bagno a Ripoli. The landscape behind them is a kaleidoscope of colors, with a bright golden sun lighting the scene. The friends appear relaxed and connected, enjoying their time together. Little espresso cups and an espresso pot are on the table. Mimi appears to be pointing the viewer to look at the beautiful landscape behind the group.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. How would you describe the mood of this painting? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. How has Mimi Gross visually communicated to us that this is a group of friends who are gathered together?
3. (Pair share) This group of friends had just come to the end of a big adventure. What are some of the things you enjoy doing with your friends?
4. A definition of identity from a crowd-sourced dictionary: "... who you are, the way you think about yourself, the way you are viewed by the world, and the characteristics that define you." How might friends influence how we think about ourselves or how we are viewed by others?

Research resources:

From Art in America: [CRITICAL EYE: MIMI GROSS IN HER WORLD](#)

Mia label: [Bagno a Ripoli \(Firenze\), 1961](#)

Eric Firestone Gallery: [MIMI GROSS](#)

Exhibition catalog of her work, includes this work: [Among Friends](#)

**ARTWORK 4 (Community or Faith): Monks of the Gyuto Tantric University, Tibet,
[Yamantaka Mandala](#), 1991**

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. A mandala is a visual representation of the sacred Buddhist universe. It is used in meditation and initiation rites. The creation of a mandala is believed to benefit all beings.
2. People work together to make a mandala of this size. A team of Tibetan monks-in-residence at Mia created this colored sand 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 knocking 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 very middle blue square 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, when Buddhist monks make a sand mandala, at the completion of its making, the mandala is then destroyed by sweeping away the sand and putting it 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. 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 to make this. In what ways does your faith or community influence or impact your identity?
3. Typically, a sand mandala is destroyed after it is made. Imagine you have spent weeks perfecting such a design. How would you feel to have it all swept away?

Research resources:

Mia label: [Yamantaka Mandala](#)

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

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

ARTWORK 5 (Cultural Heritage/Ethnicity/Race): Kevin Pourier, [Mixed Blood Guy](#), 2009

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Kevin Pourier is a Lakota artist who tackles themes of identity in his work. Here he has carved a self-portrait and titled it *Mixed Blood Guy*--so that's him, part white and part Lakota. The work reveals his complex feelings of identity, belonging, and disconnection—feelings many people experience today.
2. Wearing his signature hat and sunglasses, Pourier is literally stuck in the middle of two worlds. On either side, pointing fingers accuse him for being too Native American or not Native American enough. The captions on one side read: Get off our rez/You think ur good/You don't belong here/White guy. The captions on the other side read: Get back to the rez/You think ur bad/You don't belong here/Indian.
3. Pourier carved his self-portrait into a black buffalo horn and used natural minerals mixed with resin to color the surface. The monarch butterfly above his head, which appears in many of his artworks, came to him during a Lakota ceremony. He sees butterflies as an important connection to his Lakota identity.

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

1. Take some time to look at this self-portrait by Kevin Pourier. What first catches your eye?
2. (Ask for volunteers to read the captions along both sides of the artwork.) How does it feel to be told “you don't belong here” because of your perceived race?
3. Pourier is mixed race, but identifies primarily as Lakota. How might he overcome some of the challenges we see in the captions with the pointing fingers? How do you belong?
4. (Older students) These captions point to binary thinking--you are either THIS or THAT. How does that kind of thinking limit us as humans?
5. (Pair share) Do other people stereotype you based on your race or ethnicity? How does your race or ethnicity impact your identity?

Research resources:

Mia Label: [Mixed Blood Guy](#)

Kevin and Valerie Pourier's website: <https://www.kevinpourier.com/buffalo-horn-spoons>

[Video of the artist](#), from Nelson Atkins Museum of Art

ARTWORK 6 (Gender/Sexuality/LGBTQ+): Jeffrey Gibson, [What We Want Is Free](#), 2020

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Jeffrey Gibson is a gay Native American (part Choctaw, part Cherokee) artist. Gibson wants artists to feel comfortable with their own identities, able to create artwork that is not mainstream. He embraces queer histories and Native American histories, to give visual representation to those identities. His work helps to create a space for himself where he feels he belongs.
2. During 2020, America encountered a global pandemic, civil unrest, and calls for racial justice. Jeffrey Gibson created *What We Want is Free* during this time. Gibson states that this work expresses the necessity of “dignity, respect, joy, freedom, and liberation” for marginalized communities. In this painting, Gibson also acknowledges the struggles of the past and present and the universal need for all people to be free.
3. *What We Want is Free* contains dazzling colors and geometric shapes. The words “What We Want Is Free” can be seen abstracted on the canvas, at the top and upside down on the bottom. Multiple hues of saturated oranges and reds transition to muted greens and blues, and black triangles move diagonally across the painting, offering depth and contrast.
4. Gibson’s paintings incorporate color palettes found in historic Choctaw clothing and cultural belongings. A beaded frame offers additional texture and recognizes that beadwork is found in nearly every Indigenous community across North America.

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

1. Spend a moment looking at the work. The words “What we want is free” is repeated on the painting. Why do you think Gibson repeated these words?
2. Who are the “we” in “What we want is free”?
3. How do you understand the statement “What We Want Is Free”? What are some of the free things Gibson thinks people want?
4. When someone’s identity is linked to a marginalized community, they often are made to feel insignificant. How can we support people who feel their identities are not respected or accepted by others?

Research resources:

Mia Label: [What We Want Is Free](#)

From the LATimes: [Jeffrey Gibson: American. Native American. Gay. An artist’s life outside labels](#)

Meet the Artist: [Jeffrey Gibson | Whitney Biennial 2019](#)

ARTWORK 7 (Vocation/Work/Hobbies): Sowah Kwei, Ghana, 1954–99, [Fantasy coffin](#), 1993

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. The Ga people of Ghana commission fantasy coffins that reflect their profession or social status. This coffin is in the form of a lobster, appropriate perhaps for a fisherman's burial or perhaps functioning as a clan emblem. Coffins come in all different shapes, from giant cell phones to airplanes to cars.
2. If the coffin was opened, you would see the inside lined in blue and white silky material. This coffin was made by Sowah Kwei, a member of the Kane Kwei workshop in Teshie, Ghana, and it was made to sell on the art market. When a person commissions a coffin from the workshop, the carpenter may make two--one for the commissioner and one to sell on the art market.
3. The Ga believe that their existence continues after death and mirrors their life on earth, so they continue to affirm their living identity with such symbolic fantasy coffins. If they are buried in something that represents their job, it helps them to remember where they come from and what they left behind. It is expensive to commission a carpenter to make such a coffin, but the Ga believe it is worth the investment as their ancestors continue to influence their lives.
4. This fantasy coffin tradition was started in the 1950s by two Ghanaian artists trained in carpentry. From the 1980s on, several workshops have produced coffins solely for the local and international art market, like this lobster coffin. The form is complex, being pieced together from dozens of parts, then covered with plaster, and finally sprayed with acrylic paint.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Spend a moment looking at this artwork. What are some details that impress you?
2. See/Think/Wonder: What do you see? What do you think? What do you wonder?
3. To the Ga, their jobs or professions are a mark of social status and identity. How does that compare to American cultural beliefs?
4. (Pair share) In the future, do you think you will allow your job to define your identity? Why or why not?

Research resources:

Mia [label \(and ArtStory\)](#)

[Fantasy coffins](#), Wikipedia and [Kane Kwei Carpentry Workshop](#), Wikipedia

From CNN: [Celebrating death in style: Ghana's fantasy coffins](#)

The World.org: [Ghana's fantasy coffins: Fulfilling burial dreams one coffin at a time](#)

ARTWORK 8 (Environment): Ralph Fasanella, [Street of Dreams](#) (Broadway and Times Square), 1993 (This work is a loan, G359)

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This is a painting by Ralph Fasanella of a street scene from New York City, in Manhattan at the intersection of Broadway and Times Square. It appears to capture a memory the artist had of that place as the signs reference shows and singers of the past (such as Frank Sinatra). The scene is filled with people taking in the many sights, with neon lights blinking along many theater signs. At the base of the painting, you can see people coming up to the street level from the subway station. Cars are on the streets, and the scene is crowded with people.
2. Ralph Fasanella worked hard to be an artist. Throughout most of his life, he couldn't make enough money from his art to support himself or his family, so he worked at many different types of jobs, like being a truck driver and gas station operator. After work, he would paint scenes of his city and community.
3. Here is a quote from the artist, Ralph Fasanella: Without struggle, there is no reason to live. If you're not struggling, you don't deserve to be alive.
4. The title of the painting is Street of Dreams, and this was used as an illustration on the cover of the New Yorker magazine in 1993.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. VTS: What's going on in this painting? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find?
2. It is called the Street of Dreams. What do you think the title means?
3. Look at the many groups of people throughout the scene. How would it feel to be in this environment? What would you hear? What would you smell?
4. Would you prefer to be standing on a crowded city street or standing on a lakeshore with no one else around? Why?
5. How do you think your environment impacts or influences your identity?

Research resources:

[The Ralph Fasanella Collection and Archive](#) at the American Folk Art Museum

[Ralph Fasanella's Time Square](#) (blog post with auction results)

ARTWORK 9 (Social or Socioeconomic Status): Reginald Marsh, [Holy Name Mission](#), 1931

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Reginald Marsh was an American painter who was a social realist, meaning that he painted people of all social classes, including scenes of the poor and homeless. He lived and worked during the Great Depression, and is known for scenes of America during that hard time, like we see in this painting of the *Holy Name Mission*.
2. The Holy Name Mission was a place where homeless or jobless men could find some food and shelter at night in the city. Here we see the men waiting in a long line along the street. The colors are dark, and details emerge from the gloom of trash in the gutters of the street. Lights within a laundry and barber shop illuminate the standing men.
3. As the economy fell apart in the early 1930s and people lost their jobs, homelessness quickly followed. People could not pay their mortgages or rents, causing them to be evicted from their homes and apartments. Millions of Americans had nowhere to live. Some moved in with relatives, others squatted in abandoned buildings, while some lived in homeless encampments, building shacks from whatever materials they could find.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Use the “Unveiling Stories” thinking routine. Spend a minute looking at this scene. What is the story? What is the human story? What is the world story? What is the untold story?
2. How would it feel to be one of these men, without enough to eat or a place to sleep? How might he have been treated by others in the city, like potential employers?
3. How has Reginald Marsh conveyed this real-life situation? What choices did he make as an artist to tell this story? (Discuss colors, composition, style)
4. How does this scene compare to the situation of the homeless or unemployed in our society today?
5. (Pair share) In what ways does your social class impact your identity?

Research resources:

Art review from the New York Times: [Misery Loved a Good Night Out](#)

From the University of Washington: [Hoovervilles and Homelessness](#)

The Art Story: [Reginald Marsh biography](#)

US General Services Administration: [Reginald Marsh](#) (murals, and commentary on Social Realism)

ARTWORK 10 (Creating or expressing identity, artist's identity): Yayoi Kusama, [Untitled](#), 1967

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Yayoi Kusama is a Japanese artist who lived and worked in New York for a decade, 1958-1968, when she painted *Untitled*. Her work is diverse, and includes painting, drawing, sculpture, assemblage, performance, video, and installation. At one point, she even ventured into the fashion world with her own clothing line!
2. She is especially known for her colorful abstract paintings, in which she creates an "infinity net" of interlocking shapes, often filling those shapes with polka dots, another feature of her work. She thinks of the polka dot as a symbol for herself.
3. Kusama grew up in Japan during the time the United States still occupied her country; it was a stressful time within Japan. She experienced hallucinations and other aspects of mental illness while a child, and she continues to experience those symptoms today. She currently lives in a mental institution but travels to a studio outside the institution to work every day. She has often said that making art--the repetition of all these visual patterns--is the way she manages her mental illness.
4. This work was made shortly before she returned to Japan to seek treatment for the hallucinations and obsessive thoughts that had troubled her since childhood. *Untitled* is filled with colorful organic shapes that are filled with small to large polka dots, overlying the complex netlike grid within the shapes.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Spend a moment looking at this painting. What kind of feeling do you get when looking at it? What do you say that makes you say that?
2. If the artist sees a polka dot as a symbol for herself, what might be a meaning in repeating these throughout the painting? What might she be saying about herself and her world?
3. Kusama has been very open about living with mental illness and has often said that making art--the repetition of all these visual patterns--is the way she manages it. She shares her identity. How does our society react today to people who share that about their own identity, in living with mental illness?
4. (Pair share) If you could create something to reflect your own identity, what would it be? What medium and materials would you use?

Research resources:

Museum of Modern Art: [Why Kusama first started making polka dots](#)

Tate Gallery: [Yayoi Kusama – Obsessed with Polka Dots](#)

[Mia label](#)

The Art Story: [Yayoi Kusama](#)

Other options

(Biological/Physical)

- Marcia Marcus, [Renoir](#), 1968
- Avis Charley, [Think Long, Think Wrong](#), 2021
- Kunin portrait gallery (use entire gallery for exercise. Looking at the paintings, find someone to hang out with whom you would normally NOT want to hang out with! Spend some time exploring what about the “face value” of the portrait made you certain of that person’s characteristics or identity (30 seconds to 1 minute). How did the experience feel? If your opinion of the person shifted, why do you think that happened? If it didn’t shift, what might it take to change your first impression? (Gallery 322 is another option.)

(Family)

- Joy Labinjo, Come Play With Us, 2019 (on loan)
- Wu Family Reception Hall
- James Ensor, The Intrigue, 1911, G371

(Friends)

- Vincent D. Smith, Basketball Players, 1965, on loan G359
- Kānaka Maoli, Necklace (lei niho palaoa), c. 1800-1850

(Community/Faith)

- Replica of the Saan Teahouse at Daitokuji Gyokurin-in, Kyoto, 2001
- Clementine Hunter, Picking Cotton, 1950s
- Carla Hemlock, United States, 1961, Boomin' Out, 2015

(Cultural Heritage/Ethnicity/Race)

- Zhang Huan, China, 1/2 (Text), 1998
- Mende, Sierra Leone, Africa, Mask, 20th century
- Bisa Butler, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (promised gift)

(Gender/Sexuality/LGBTQ+)

- Beauford Delaney, Untitled, 1947 (or any other Delaney work)
- Didier William, Touye Tout Konchon Yo, 2018 (on loan)

(Vocation/Work/Hobbies)

- Beauford Delaney, Jazz Quartet, 1946.
- Attributed to Johann Daniel Heimlich, Portrait of the Silversmith Johann Friedrich Baer, 1770

(Environment)

- William J. Glackens, Cap Noir - St. Pierre, 1902

(Social or Socioeconomic status)

- Grand Salon of the Hôtel de la Bouexière

(Creating or Expressing Identity--from the artist)

- Virgil Ortiz, Jagg and Gage, 2020-2021
- George Morrison, Lake Superior Landscape, 1981
- Check out artist self-portraits, like Frances Cranmer Greenman, Self-portrait, 1923