

NORTON SIMON MUSEUM

STUDENT PREPARATORY PACKET

THE MODERN WORLD

Introduction to the Norton Simon Museum

The Norton Simon Museum is known as one of the world's most remarkable private art collections. Seven centuries of European art dating from the Renaissance to the 20th century are on permanent display, including Old Master paintings by Raphael, Rubens, Zurbarán, Rembrandt and Goya. The Museum also features a celebrated Impressionist and Post-Impressionist collection—with paintings by Manet, Monet, Degas, Van Gogh and Cézanne—as well as 20th-century works by Picasso, Matisse and Brancusi. Moreover, the Museum has one of the premier collections of South and Southeast Asian art in the country, spanning a period of 2,000 years.

Curriculum Materials

The following curriculum materials are intended to help prepare your students for their tour. These materials include lesson plans and vocabulary guides for a selection of artworks. You may also find it helpful to visit our [website](#), where you can find information about special exhibitions, podcasts and a collections database with information about individual works of art.

Lesson Overview

Each lesson provides brief background information about the artwork and artist, followed by questions that promote observation and discussion. Suggested classroom activities offer students the opportunity to explore the collection through writing and art-making projects.

Learning Objectives

Students are encouraged to:

- *take time to look closely*
- *describe what they see*
- *connect the visual arts with historical periods and religious traditions*
- *create original artworks focusing on themes and formal elements of art found in works from the Norton Simon Museum*

Curriculum Standards

The materials address content standards for California public schools in visual arts, history–social science and Common Core English-language arts for grades 5–12.

The Ragpicker, c. 1865–70
Édouard Manet
French, 1832–1883
Oil on canvas
76¾ x 51½ in. (194.9 x 130.8 cm)

Manet: The Painter of Modern Life

Often referred to as “the painter of modern life,” Édouard Manet bridged the transition from **traditional studio practice** to Modern painting. While his subjects and style were considered innovative and even rebellious, he retained an interest in the Old Masters and a desire to gain the approval of the Academy.

Key Concepts

Manet’s *Ragpicker* exemplifies the beginning of Modern painting; it represents a shift from traditional subject matter (biblical or historical themes) to that of everyday, contemporary life.

Manet’s visible **brushwork** and honest subject matter caused the first significant break from **traditional studio practice painting**, a precedent that was soon followed by his friends Monet, Degas, Renoir and others who came to be known as the **Impressionists**.

Depicting a figure beyond the confines of middle-class values and responsibilities, Manet’s *Ragpicker* suggests the freedom to live outside traditional societal expectations and cultural norms, a reflection of the spirit of liberal urban Paris at the time.



A Closer Look at *The Ragpicker*

- The subject and title of the painting refer to a ragpicker, someone who collected rags to sell to paper manufacturers in the 19th century.
- The painting is one of Manet’s “Four Philosophers” series, which consists of portraits of **beggar-philosophers** inspired by a similar series painted by the 17th-century Spanish master [Diego Velázquez](#). Manet’s depiction of the **beggar-philosopher** does not romanticize the figure but instead shows him hunched over and dirty, with torn clothing and a hardened expression.
- The painting’s near-life-size format made it controversial, as portraits of this scale were normally reserved for subjects of much higher social status.

Discussion Questions

- Describe the man in this painting. How does Manet convey his social status?
- How would you describe Manet’s painting style and the color **palette** he used? What impact do these stylistic choices have on the overall effect of the painting?

Activity

- Compare this painting to a painting of a similar size, [*Portrait of Theresa, Countess Kinsky*](#), by Marie-Louise-Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun. Discuss how these two works are similar, and identify some differences. (Topics to consider include dress, background, level of realism and tone.) Then write a short story about Countess Kinsky and the Ragpicker. How might their lives be different? How do you think they would interact?



Vocabulary

- **Beggar-philosopher:** a poor person who lives a seminomadic life free from middle-class concerns and thus is able to focus on less worldly and loftier philosophical thoughts; the beggar-philosopher was a popular concept in literature and art.
- **Brushwork:** the manner in which a painter applies paint with a brush.
- **Impressionism:** a movement or style of painting that originated in the 1860s in France, characterized by the use of unmixed colors and small brushstrokes to capture the effects of light and create an “impression” of the subject matter at a given moment.
- **Palette:** the range of colors used in a particular painting.
- **Traditional studio practice paintings:** paintings in the style of the Academie des Beaux-Arts, a fine arts institution in France that determined the acceptable art styles in the 19th century.

ABOVE:

Portrait of Theresa, Countess Kinsky, 1793

Marie-Louise-Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun

French, 1755–1842

Oil on canvas

54 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 39 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (137.5 x 100.0 cm)

Farmhouse and Chestnut Trees at Jas de Bouffan, 1884–85

Paul Cézanne

French, 1839–1906

Oil on canvas

36½ x 28½ in. (91.8 x 72.9 cm)

Cézanne: Father of Formalism

Although he exhibited at the first Impressionist exhibit in 1874, Paul Cézanne rejected Impressionism's fidelity to the moment. He composed scenes based on how he thought they should look, in the interest of compositional harmony, rather than on how they actually looked.

Key Concepts

Cézanne insisted that the formal structure of painting should be dominant, and he made his subjects simple and geometric.



This depiction of rural architecture (the home belonged to Cézanne's family) represents a world beyond urban Paris—a France steeped in tradition and one that reflects a slower, perhaps even more noble, way of life.

Cézanne was the definitive transitional figure between the artists of the 19th century and those of the 20th, and both Picasso and Matisse referred to him as “the father of us all.”

A Closer Look at *Farmhouse and Chestnut Trees at Jas de Bouffan*

- The surface of the painting is very thinly painted, revealing the preparatory drawing and white canvas underneath. This lack of “finish” disrupts the illusion of a landscape by reminding the viewer of the act of painting.
- The definition among the objects blurs in places, allowing the trees to merge with the surrounding sky and earth, and Cézanne tilted the edge of the house so that it appears to lean toward the tree branches overhead.
- In contrast to earlier paintings of rural landscapes, this painting is devoid of people and there is nothing romanticized about it.

Discussion Questions

- Knowing that Cézanne emphasized **formal qualities**, why do you think he chose this style and arrangement? What effect do his choices—in terms of line, shape, surface and **composition**—have on the overall impact of the painting?
- Compare this painting to Monet's [Artist's Garden at Vétheuil](#) from just four years earlier. In what ways did Cézanne break from Impressionism?



Activity

- Think about how you would make a painting or sculpture that calls attention to the way it is made. Then paint or sculpt a piece based on your ideas.

Vocabulary

- **Composition:** the overall arrangement of the different parts and elements of an artwork.
- **Formal qualities:** design elements such as balance, composition, color, line, scale, shading, texture and volume.

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The Artist's Garden at Vétheuil, 1881

Claude Monet

French, 1840–1926

Oil on canvas

39½ x 32 in. (100.3 x 81.3 cm)

Woman with a Guitar, 1913
Pablo Picasso
Spanish, 1881–1973
Oil on canvas
39⁵/₈ x 32¹/₈ in. (100 x 81.6 cm)



Picasso: The Most Influential Artist of the 20th Century

Pablo Picasso is known for his experimentation and mastery of many styles over his long career. Under the influence of Cézanne, Picasso and his colleague Georges Braque developed **Cubism**, which uses highly **abstract** geometric forms to emphasize the flatness of their paintings.

Key Concepts

Cubism is the most transformative style of art of the 20th century and Picasso was its biggest proponent.

Cubism wrestled with representing the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional canvas, openly exploring painting's formal qualities (balance, composition, color, line, scale, shading, texture and volume).

In these early **Cubist** works, Picasso juxtaposed flat areas of color against highly modeled surfaces and provided multiple viewpoints of the same object.

A Closer Look at *Woman with a Guitar*

- The painting consists of a series of flat shapes and black lines arranged to overlap like a **collage** within a shallow, relief-like space.
- If you look closely, you will recognize fragments of the woman's head and the guitar's body. Figures and musical instruments were favorite **motifs** of **Cubist** paintings.
- Like Cézanne before him, Picasso left blank canvas visible in the background to remind the viewer that this is a painting rather than a **naturalistic** representation, and yet elsewhere he attempted to create the illusion of marble.



Discussion Questions

- Do you recognize any of the objects or figures named in the title of the painting?
The woman and her guitar are simplified and fractured into shapes so viewers can see them from multiple viewpoints at once. You can see part of her head and hand, as well as the curves and sound hole of the guitar.
- Picasso often restricted himself to near-**monochromatic** palettes of brown, black and gray. Why do you think he chose these colors? What effect does this have on the painting and the way you look at it?

Activity

- Cut out objects from magazines and patterned paper for a **collage** and cut these various components into geometric shapes. Then glue your cutouts on paper to create a geometric **collage** that plays with shape and pattern.

Vocabulary

- **Abstract art:** works of art that may have form, but have little or no attempt at pictorial representation.
- **Collage:** a technique of creating a work of art by gluing various materials on a surface.
- **Cubism:** a style of art in which subjects are reduced and fractured into geometric forms and then realigned within a shallow, relief-like space. Cubists also often used multiple or contrasting viewpoints so that several sides of an object can be seen simultaneously.
- **Monochromatic:** consisting of shades of one color rather than a range of different colors.
- **Motif:** a distinctive and often recurring feature in a composition.
- **Naturalistic:** pertaining to a faithful adherence to nature; factual or realistic representation.

Bird in Space, 1931
Constantin Brancusi
Romanian, 1876–1957
Polished bronze
73 in. (185.4 cm)

Brancusi: Sculpting Abstraction

Constantin Brancusi was a Romanian-born sculptor and a member of the **School of Paris** who experimented with the extreme simplification of forms. He believed that “what is real is not the external form, but the essence of things” and his mission was to strip his subjects to their core and sculpt them in their essential form.

Key Concepts

Brancusi was one of the 20th century’s most influential sculptors and he dealt with the abstraction of three-dimensional objects.

The fully simplified forms created in the mature phase of Brancusi’s career evoke the essence of things rather than the things themselves—here the soaring, polished form of *Bird in Space* suggests flight.

Brancusi introduced the idea of utilizing a sculpture’s surroundings (whether room, gallery or landscape) as part of the actual work of art.



A Closer Look at *Bird in Space*

- *Bird in Space* is **sculpture in the round**. It has neither a front nor a back; it is meant to be seen from all angles, and thus invites viewers to move around it.
- The sculpture is so highly polished that it reflects everything around it and thus viewers’ changing reflections become part of the work itself.
- *Bird in Space* is very narrow at its base and slightly off center, making it less grounded than a piece with a wider or heavier base and giving it a sense of instability that implies the potential for motion.

Discussion Questions

- How did Brancusi communicate a sense of flight in his sculpture?
- Brancusi created many versions of this sculpture in different sizes and materials, always paying meticulous attention to **finish**. In this case, the bronze was deliberately polished to produce its gleaming, reflective surface. Compare *Bird in Space* to Giacometti’s [Tall Figure IV](#), which is also made of bronze. What differences do you notice in terms of color and texture? How does the sculpture’s **finish** contribute to the overall effect of a bird in flight?

Activity

- Draw or sculpt one of your favorite activities, giving just enough information to communicate the feeling of that activity in your artwork.



Vocabulary

- **Finish:** the characteristics of a surface; the exterior texture of a sculpture.
- **School of Paris:** a loosely affiliated group of foreign-born artists working together in the Montparnasse area of Paris, including Picasso, Miró, de Chirico, Modigliani, Chagall and Brancusi.
- **Sculpture in the round:** a freestanding sculpture, not attached to any surface other than its base, that one can move around and view from all angles.

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Tall Figure IV, 1960

Alberto Giacometti

Swiss, 1901–1966

Bronze, Edition of 6, Cast No. 1

106½ x 12 x 22 in. (270.5 x 30.5 x 55.9 cm)

***Heavy Circles*, 1927**

Vasily Kandinsky

Russian, 1866–1944

Oil on canvas

22½ x 20½ in. (57.2 x 52.1 cm)

Kandinsky: Inventing Abstraction

In the course of his career, Vasily Kandinsky moved progressively further away from representational art and closer to complete abstraction. He wanted viewers to respond to his abstract paintings instinctively, appreciating parts and then the whole, as if hearing a symphony.

Key Concepts

Kandinsky was the first artist to completely abandon representational art and create a fully abstract painting.

Kandinsky employed color, form and line to infuse his paintings with meaning.

Born in Russia, Kandinsky moved to Germany in 1896 to paint, and he led the **avant-garde** with his teaching at the influential **Bauhaus** school and with his significant body of published work on color theory and geometry.

A Closer Look at *Heavy Circles*

- Kandinsky felt that circles had a clear association with time because they have no sides, ends or points. He saw his paintings not just as representations of something spatial, existing in one specific moment, but as expressive of multiple moments.
- The **Bauhaus** style was marked by geometric simplicity, which was partly inspired by Russian **Constructivism**.
- Here Kandinsky used geometric shapes as purely painterly elements without reference to reality to create a more open-ended, emotional impact rather than an intellectual one.

Discussion Questions

- Kandinsky believed that “color is a means of exerting direct influence upon the soul.” How do the colors and shapes in this painting make you feel?
- How did Kandinsky give this painting a sense of space and time?

Activity

- Look at the painting and write three words you would use to describe the artwork or how it makes you feel. Then write a short poem or story based on those words and share your composition with the class.

Vocabulary

- **Avant-garde:** a group of artists who develop new and experimental concepts.
- **Bauhaus:** a German art movement, style and school whose goal was to promote the unity of the arts, including architecture, sculpture, paintings and crafts.
- **Constructivism:** an art movement that originated in Russia and focused on abstract, geometric form.

