

NORTON SIMON MUSEUM

STUDENT PREPARATORY PACKET

CULTIVATING EMPATHY THROUGH ART

About 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, Goya and Vigée-LeBrun. The Museum also boasts a celebrated Impressionist and Postimpressionist collection—with paintings by Manet, Degas, Cézanne, Monet, Morisot and Van Gogh—as well as 20th-century works by Matisse, Brancusi, Picasso and Hepworth. 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 introduce your students to art and art history. These materials include discussion questions, activities and vocabulary guides for a selection of artworks. You may also find it helpful to visit our [website](#), where you can find more activities, tools for talking about art with your students, videos and more information about the collection.

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.



INTRODUCTION: CULTIVATING EMPATHY THROUGH ART

Empathy is the act of understanding and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experience of another person. Empathy means acknowledging our shared humanity in the face of external differences, and it is key to creating a more just and equitable society.

Empathy is an essential life skill, but studies have shown that empathy cannot be taken for granted. As people spend more time communicating digitally and less time learning how to speak and listen to each other, researchers have noted a decrease in empathy. In fact, a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Psychological Science by

Sara Konrath in 2010, “Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis,” found that college students are 40 percent less empathetic than those of 40 years ago, with the numbers plunging primarily after 2000.

Museums like the Norton Simon are uniquely positioned to foster empathy and bring people of diverse backgrounds together. A 2012–13 study by the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art found that school visits to museums lead to an increase in critical thinking, recall, tolerance, empathy and cultural interest in students. Even when students are unable to visit the museum, conversations about art in the classroom (virtual or otherwise) require thoughtful listening, mutual respect and open-mindedness.

The artworks in this curriculum packet have been chosen for their power to engage students in their stories and, in doing so, help students identify with the experiences of individuals in very different circumstances. In connecting with these artworks, students will develop the skills they need to understand those who are different from themselves and to explore and connect with human stories from a wide swath of time periods and cultures.

Madonna and Child with Adoring Angel, c. 1468
Sandro (Alessandro Filipepi) Botticelli (Italian, c. 1444–1510)
Tempera on panel, 35 x 26 ¾ in. (88.9 x 68 cm)
Norton Simon Art Foundation

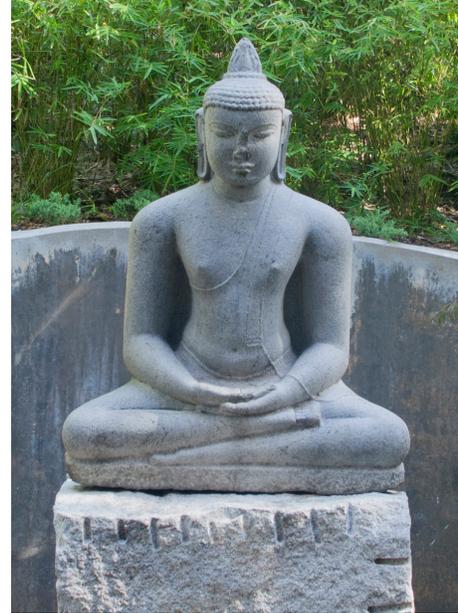
Buddha Shakyamuni, c. 1100

India: Tamil Nadu

Granite

50 x 37 x 16 in. (127 x 94 x 40.6 cm)

The Norton Simon Foundation



Finding Inner Peace and Calm

In **Buddhism**, a **Buddha** is an **enlightened** being who has reached the highest knowledge of truth. Buddhists believe that there have been many **Buddhas** over time and that **Shakyamuni** is the **Buddha** of our era. The **Buddha Shakyamuni** was born Prince Siddhartha Gautama around 2,500–2,600 years ago in what is now Nepal. Gautama led a very sheltered, luxurious life until he was 29 years old, when he first became aware of the poverty, sickness and death outside his palace walls. Unable to continue living in luxury in the midst of so much suffering, Gautama left the comfort and safety of his home to seek **enlightenment**. After attaining **enlightenment**, he traveled around India teaching people of all ranks, from kings to peasants. His teachings, the **dharma**, are the foundation of **Buddhism**, and they emphasize moderation, freedom from worldly attachments and compassion for all.

Key Concepts

After the **Buddha Shakyamuni's** death, his followers continued to spread the **dharma** across Asia with the aid of religious sculpture and sacred texts. As **Buddhism** spread from India to Southeast Asia, China, Japan and Korea, it came to encompass a wide range of religious rituals and art, but all remain rooted in the fundamental principles of the **dharma**.

There were no visual images of the **Buddha Shakyamuni** until centuries after his death. As a result, sculptures of the **Buddha** can look very different, depending on where and when they were made. Despite these differences, the **Buddha** is always recognizable by his 32 defining characteristics, called **lakshana**. These attributes include his **ushnisha**—the bump on the crown of his head signifying his great wisdom. In this sculpture, the **ushnisha** is represented as a flame symbolizing illumination or knowledge.

Representations of the **Buddha** are strictly symbolic; they serve as objects of contemplation and **meditation** aids for Buddhists. Here, the **Buddha** sits in a classic **meditation** pose. He makes the *dhyanamudra*, a hand gesture of contemplation, in which one hand is placed on top of the other, with the palms facing upward, resting on the sole of the right foot.

A Closer Look at *Buddha Shakyamuni*

- Despite damage to the nose of this sculpture, the **Buddha's** face is tranquil. His eyes are half-closed, shutting out the distractions around him to focus on inner peace and reflection. He projects a sense of calm and security.
- The **Buddha's** elongated earlobes are a reminder of his former life as a prince, when he would have worn heavy and bejeweled earrings that stretched his ears.
- The **Buddha** has shorn hair and wears simple, translucent monk's robes to show his renunciation of his former princely life. During his time as a prince, he would have had long hair that was heavily adorned. It is likely that this sculpture was made for contemplation in a monastery.

Discussion Questions

- The **Buddha** left his home and family and gave up all he had ever known to seek truth and help others. Can you think of modern-day examples of this kind of sacrifice? Are there any things that you have given up to achieve a larger goal?
- What are some words that you would use to describe this sculpture? What are some words that describe how you feel when you look at this sculpture?
- If you were to listen to music while looking at this artwork, what would you choose? What features of the music (for example, volume, speed, instruments, or lyrics) would suit this sculpture?

Activity

- *Shutting out the outside world meditation:* Sit cross-legged in front of an image of this sculpture. Try to replicate the **Buddha's** pose by sitting up straight and lowering your shoulders to make sure you are not hunched or tense. Focus on your breathing, and with each breath challenge yourself to make your inhalations and exhalations longer than the last ones until you reach a maximum length of breath that is comfortable for you. Continue breathing in this way for one minute (set a timer with a bell sound).
- Close your eyes and begin to count your breaths. When you inhale count 1. When you exhale count 2. Inhale 3. Exhale 4, and so on. Continue counting until you reach 10, and then begin again with 1.
- Continue this exercise for five minutes (set a timer with a bell sound). Then open your eyes and turn your attention to the artwork. Spend five minutes looking at this piece in silence.
- How did it feel to stop and focus on your breath without distractions? How did it feel to look at this sculpture for so long? What did you notice that you hadn't noticed before? How do you think the breathing exercise changed your perception of the piece?

Vocabulary

- **Buddha:** an enlightened being who has achieved knowledge of truth and is thereby freed from the continuous cycle of life, death and rebirth known as *samsara*. *Samsara* is a central belief in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.
- **Buddha Shakyamuni:** the *Buddha* of our age, founder of *Buddhism*; formerly Siddhartha, a prince who lived sometime between the 6th and 4th c. BCE.
- **Buddhism:** a faith based on the teaching of the *Buddha Shakyamuni*.
- **Dharma:** the teachings of the *Buddha*.
- **Enlightenment:** the knowledge of truth, release from *samsara*.
- **Lakshana:** the Buddha's 32 defining characteristics.
- **Meditation:** a practice in which an individual trains attention and awareness, and achieves a mentally clear and emotionally calm and stable state.
- **Ushnisha:** the bump on the crown of the *Buddha's head*, signifying enlightenment.



Camillus and the Schoolmaster of Falerii, c. 1635-40
Nicolas Poussin (French, 1594-1665)
Oil on canvas
39 ⁵/₈ x 54 in. (100.6 x 137.2 cm)
The Norton Simon Foundation

An Ancient Story with Timeless Lessons

This painting represents the dramatic story of the Roman general **Marcus Furius Camillus** and his siege of the walled city of Falerii. During the siege, the town's schoolmaster regularly took his students for a walk around the city walls for exercise. Each day he led them farther and farther out, until he eventually led them to the Roman camp. There, he offered them to **Camillus** as hostages, in hopes of ending the siege and earning his favor. But the schoolmaster misjudged the Roman general. **Camillus** was appalled by the schoolmaster's treachery against his own people. Finding him guilty of treason, **Camillus** turned him over, stripped and bound, to his students and their parents for punishment. The children's grateful parents made peace with Rome, and Camillus returned to Rome victorious.

Key Concepts

The story of **Marcus Furius Camillus** was first recorded by the Roman historian **Livy** in his *History of Rome* (27-9 BCE) and then by the Greek historian **Plutarch** in his *Parallel Lives* (2nd century CE). Both accounts stress the role of good and ethical leadership in the triumph of Rome. In **Plutarch's** account of this episode, **Camillus** explains his treatment of the schoolmaster of Falerii to his soldiers thus: "War is indeed a grievous thing, and is waged with much injustice and violence; but even war has certain laws which good and brave men will respect... The great general will wage war relying on his own native valor, not on the baseness of other men."

Nicolas Poussin, the French artist who painted this scene, frequently chose subjects from Greek and Roman history, and he was very influenced by **classical** art. Here, the figures resemble ancient Greek and Roman sculptures in their attention to anatomy and their dramatic poses.

Poussin was the leading painter of French **Classicism**, a style that organized natural elements into orderly, balanced **compositions**. Here, the **composition** is clearly structured into horizontal bands of **foreground** and **background**, with vertical bands of Romans on the left and Faleriians on the right.

A Closer Look at *Camillus and the Schoolmaster of Falerii*

- Poussin has provided clues to the context of the story in the details and **composition** of the painting. On the left, the general **Camillus** is surrounded by his soldiers, who carry spears and shields and wear elaborate helmets. The tent behind them represents the Roman encampment. On the right, the walled city of Falerii, from which the boys and their schoolmaster have come and to which they will return, is visible in the **background**.
- Poussin shows the twisting and grimacing schoolmaster stripped and bound, with his students gathered around him. They point and yell at him just before they lead him back to the city. His pose and anguished expression recalls the famous Roman sculpture [Laocoön and His Sons](#), which has been part of the Vatican's collection in Rome, where Poussin studied, since it was excavated in 1506. The sculpture, dated to 40–30 BCE, is an iconic representation of human agony and has influenced artists for centuries.
- In sharp contrast to the schoolmaster, **Camillus** sits on an elevated platform at left in a regal red robe and laurel wreath, grasping a staff with one hand and delivering judgment with the other. In ancient Rome, the laurel wreath was a symbol of victory in war, and was worn by successful commanders.

Discussion Questions

- Both **Livy** and **Plutarch** stress the importance of good leadership, as does Poussin. How has Poussin represented **Camillus's** qualities as a leader? What qualities do you think make a good leader? How would you represent these qualities visually? (Possible extension: Create a campaign poster for your ideal leader, making sure that it displays these qualities.)
- Camillus had no way of knowing for certain that the Falerians would surrender and make peace with Rome after he returned their children. His choice could have made the siege and battle last longer, exhausting resources and potentially leading to more suffering and greater loss of life. What are some examples of difficult decisions that leaders are making today? Do you agree with these decisions? If not, what would you do differently?

Activity

- Choose a character in the painting (for example, **Camillus**, the schoolmaster or the students) and write a poem from their perspective, starting with the phrase "I am..." and continuing on with "I feel..."
- OR, as a class, re-create the poses and facial expressions in this piece and hold them for a moment, having your teacher photograph your group pose to be viewed by the class. (If you are doing this activity from home, take a selfie of yourself posing as a character in the painting and share with the class.) Did the poses feel natural? Why do you think Poussin chose the poses that he did? What do they communicate to the viewer? What emotions did you feel while reenacting this piece? Did holding the poses of the various characters help you empathize with their plight?

Vocabulary

- **Background:** the part of a scene or picture that is farthest from the viewer.
- **Classical:** relating to ancient Greek or Roman art, literature or culture.
- **Classicism:** art inspired by classical art and culture. This style of art emphasized formal composition, harmony, and historical subject matter.
- **Composition:** the overall arrangement of the parts and elements of an artwork.
- **Foreground:** the part of a scene or picture that is nearest to the viewer.
- **History painting:** a type of art depicting serious narratives, often derived from ancient history, that include examples of noble behavior to be imitated. History painting was considered the most important genre.
- **Livy:** a Roman historian (64 BCE–12 CE) and author of the *History of Rome*, a history that begins with Aeneas of Troy and continues to Livy's own time, emphasizing its glory.
- **Marcus Furius Camillus:** a Roman general (c. 446–365 BCE) known as the second founder of Rome.
- **Plutarch:** a Greek biographer (46–120 CE) and essayist known for his *Parallel Lives*, a series of 50 biographies of famous Greeks and Romans.

Women Ironing, began c. 1875–76; reworked c. 1882–86
Edgar Degas (French, 1834–1917)
Oil on canvas
32¼ x 29¼ in. (81.9 x 75.5 cm)
Norton Simon Art Foundation



The Working-class Women of 19th-Century Paris

In the 19th century, the number of workers in Paris sharply increased. Working-class women seemed to be everywhere, and they became a symbol of the modern city, especially women in the laundry industry. Huge numbers of women worked to collect, wash, iron and return people's clothes. Washerwomen gathered soiled laundry from people's homes and then washed it at large washhouses. Ironers worked in small indoor spaces maneuvering irons that weighed as much as seven pounds in extreme heat. They ironed bonnets, blouses and shirtfronts, as well as sheets, tablecloths and curtains. The work was monotonous, the workday was long (15 to 18 hours, starting at 5 a.m.) and the low wages barely covered basic living expenses. To make matters worse, the working conditions were miserable. The hot, humid air affected the abdomen and throat, and bronchitis and tuberculosis were common.

Key Concepts

In this painting, two ironers hunch over a pile of starched shirts. They yawn and drink wine, which was made readily available to workers in order to keep them working. Degas shows both the repetitive work and the resulting exhaustion. When working on paintings of laundresses, Degas studied the techniques and terminology of the laundry industry, and he spent time getting to know the work and conditions. His attention to detail shows in the women's postures and exertion.

At the time, **naturalist** novels about working-class women who fell into disgrace were very popular among middle-class readers. Published a year after Degas exhibited this painting, **Émile Zola's** *L'Assommoir* (1877) tells the story of Gervaise, a laundress who falls into financial ruin. The novel included shocking descriptions of working conditions and became a huge success, helping to establish Zola's fame and reputation.

Degas exhibited pictures of laundresses in four of the seven Impressionist exhibitions he participated in, and he painted four variations of this particular composition. He appreciated laundresses not only as an aesthetic subject but also as a symbol of modern Paris. In 1872, he wrote from New Orleans to fellow artist James Tissot, "Everything is beautiful in this world of the people. But one Paris laundry girl, with bare arms, is worth it all for such a pronounced Parisian as I am."

A Closer Look at *Women Ironing*

- Note the laundress's bare arms and chest. Respectable women would have been fully covered at all times, but the ground-floor shops where ironing was done were excessively hot and made staying fully dressed unbearable. Because of the heat, the doors of the shops were often kept open, and any passerby could easily see the women working semidressed and judge them for their overexposure.
- Degas captures the impression of this oppressive heat and haze by using flesh, cream and rust tones against dull, almost metallic blues and whites. The edges of the forms are soft—blurred rather than crisp—and the paint has a pastel-like texture and roughness. The effect is a slight blur, as if the room has been saturated with steam from the irons and we are seeing the scene through the exhausted laundress's point of view.
- The women depicted here are too generalized to be portraits; they are not specific people, but rather a type. Despite this fact, they are neither **idealized** nor **caricatured**. The tight crop of the composition, so close that it cuts off part of an arm and limits our view of the room, gives the painting a narrow, claustrophobic perspective. The setting is **atmospheric**, giving a sense of the confined and weary working conditions.

Discussion Questions

- How does the close cropping of the composition affect your perspective on the scene? Where has Degas placed you, the viewer, in relation to the laundresses, and how does this affect the way you see and identify with them?
- While Degas took care to depict the exhaustion and claustrophobia of the laundresses, he also viewed them in very formal, aesthetic terms. His depictions of laundresses were popular with his well-to-do contemporaries, and the majority of his finished depictions of laundresses were sold during his lifetime. How do you feel about the fact that upper-class patrons, and Degas himself, would buy and display such images of the working class? Can you think of examples of celebrated artworks, TV shows or movies featuring the working class in our society? Do you think they lead to increased awareness or empathy?

Activity

- Alternate taking the pose of each of these women. How does it feel? Inspired by this painting and Degas's paintings of the dance, which also feature working-class women, choreograph a dance incorporating the poses of the laundresses. Capture the mood of the painting and the perspective of the laundresses in a different art form.
- OR write a poem from the perspective of one of these laundresses, describing the setting, how you are feeling and how it feels to be depicted by a famous artist in this way.

Vocabulary

- **Atmospheric:** an artwork that creates an aesthetic or emotional atmosphere and emphasizes an impression or tone.
- **Caricaturized:** something that is very exaggerated in a funny or foolish way.
- **Émile Zola:** (1840–1902) a French novelist, playwright and journalist, the best-known practitioner of the literary school of *naturalism*.
- **Idealized:** something that is depicted as perfect or better than reality.
- **Naturalism:** a style and theory of representation in art, literature and theater beginning in the late 1800s and based on the accurate depiction of detail. Unlike realism, naturalism embraced the concept of scientific determinism, which held that individuals were products of their heredity and environment.