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Telling Images: Stories in Art

Introduction

What is a story? Why do we tell stories? How does a work of art tell a story? How do stories educate? What is your story? Stories shape our knowledge and understanding of the world we live in. Telling stories helps all of us—individuals, families, communities, and nations—to understand who we are and what we believe. Stories provide records of the lives of people who lived before us; they reveal the past and help us map out the future. Stories not only entertain, they also teach lessons: Through the adventures of gods and goddesses, we learn about human nature, and through stories about the conquest of good over evil, we learn about moral behavior. Political history can tell us where we came from as a people, and the story of our own families can tell us where we came from as individuals.

Stories have been a rich source of subject matter for artists since the beginning of history. In Western culture, not so long ago, classical mythology, historical events, and biblical themes were considered the most important subjects to portray. Artists were expected to represent such subjects as part of their formal training, and ordinary people instantly recognized these popular stories represented primarily through painting and sculpture. Today, film, television, and books tell most of our culture’s stories, and the stories are for the most part very different than those that inspired artists in the past. To fully appreciate an earlier work of art, viewers must understand how that work of art interprets a given story.

The essential elements of a story are an introduction, characters, a setting, some kind of action, and an ending or resolution. Stories describe a series of events that require the passage of time. For visual artists the challenge is to tell a story, which is linear in form and unfolds in time, in one static image. Some artists use a series of paintings to represent a sequence of events in a story, while others represent several scenes within a
single work. For viewers who know a given story, the depiction of the climactic moment is sufficient to evoke the entire tale.

Though the exhibition *Telling Images: Stories in Art* is geared primarily to children ages seven to twelve and their parents and teachers, it is appropriate for visitors of all ages. The exhibition brings together six works of art from the collections of The Art Institute of Chicago that tell stories based on folklore, religion, and mythology; genealogy and history; autobiography and fantasy. Each object is presented in a carefully designed setting, inspired by the art object and its original context. Interactive games encourage visitors to discover the story in the object and to create their own stories.

*Saint George Killing the Dragon* by Bernardo Martorell is on view in a contemplative setting reflective of a small chapel. Other scenes from the life of Saint George appear in a reproduction of the original altarpiece of which the Art Institute painting is the largest and most important element. A storybook recounts the tale of Saint George, the Christian knight who killed a dragon to rescue a princess and save a town. The setting for *Rip Van Winkle* includes a photomural from a popular children's picturebook on the character, illustrated by artist Gary Kelley. The story of Rip is not only the tale of an individual who has slept his life away, it is also the story of political and historical change in early American history.

The *Royal Altar Tusk* of the Benin people is mounted on a semicircular platform resembling a Benin altar. Stories represented on the tusk can be heard in the environment, and an interactive device identifies symbolic carvings of the Obas, or kings, of Benin, their supporters, and significant animals. The tusk offers a record of Benin rulers, including stories of their origins and of major events in their lives. The *Statue of the Standing Vishnu* stands in quiet, majestic repose in a temple-like setting, surrounded by reproductions of the god's ten avatars, or incarnations. Through each avatar, Vishnu undertakes heroic adventures to save the world of human beings from disasters. The epic migration of African Americans from southern to northern states during the Great Depression inspired Walter Ellison's *Train Station*, which is presented in
a setting evocative of a railroad station. Documentary materials of the time accompany the painting. Martina Lopez explores family history in her landscape photographs *Heirs Come To Pass, 3* and *Revolutions in Time, 1*. On the opposite wall a photomural created by the artist combines original source material from her photographs with family portraits and stories contributed by visitors.

Different cultures have different ways of telling stories and sharing knowledge. For centuries people have told stories to each other through music, dance, theater, the written word, and visual images. Literacy is the ability to understand ideas and messages conveyed in these different artforms. The museum provides a rich environment for developing visual literacy in addition to helping children learn about our shared cultural legacy. Art that tells stories is ideal in the acquisition of visual literacy, because stories are easily understood and inherently engaging.

Imagination plays a key role in the development of both verbal and visual literacy. In order to read, children must be able to imagine. In using their imagination, children can visualize concepts. Looking at art helps children, who are developing and expanding their imaginative capacities, understand how ideas and stories are communicated through images. In the classroom, teachers can help students discuss, analyze, and interpret works of art. What students see, what they think about what they see, and the sharing of their responses broadens their understanding of both the work of art and the world they live in. This dynamic interplay helps children grow intellectually and learn how to think.

This manual is intended for use in the classroom both before and after visits to the museum. There are six chapters, each one devoted to a work of art in the exhibition, and a slide of each object is included. Each chapter begins with an overview of the artist which corresponds to the text panel in the exhibition. This introduction is followed by background information on the object, a glossary, discussion questions, art activities, a bibliography, and slides of the six objects. The activities include
drawing, painting, writing, and performance suggestions that will encourage students to bring their own personal interpretations to the artworks and help them create their own stories based on their life experiences, beliefs, and values.

The planning process for Telling Images: Stories in Art is a story in itself. Telling Images began, as do many exhibitions at The Art Institute of Chicago, with an idea and a selection of objects. From there, a process of conversation and brainstorming among education and curatorial staff took place, followed by consultation with an advisory group of professionals from the education community. The unique aspect of the story began with the design development process. An advisory group of twelve children, called the Art Team, was formed. The children were selected from public, private, and parochial schools in the Chicago metropolitan area and represent a true cross-section of economic and racial backgrounds. The Art Team met regularly for close to one year with architect Stanley Tigerman and museum professionals. The young people participated in slide presentations, workshops, brainstorming sessions, and worked diligently on the design of the exhibition. Meetings were held at the museum and at the architect's office, giving the Art Team the unique opportunity to learn about the designing of an exhibition and to experience a behind-the-scenes view of how an art museum operates.

Learning involves venturing into new territory. The Sol and Celia Hammerman Gallery of the Kraft Education Center provides a unique learning environment and valuable educational resources for children, parents, and teachers. It is an experimental space in which museum staff can test the effectiveness of new pedagogical and interpretive strategies and make modifications as needed. The overall goal of Hammerman Gallery exhibitions is to introduce children, parents, and teachers to original works of art using a broad range of interpretive materials including didactic text panels, interactive devices, and computer games. The goal of Telling Images is to impart an understanding of six objects with a broad range of narrative content and to encourage looking at other objects in the collec-
tion of the Art Institute that tell a story.

This teacher manual represents the work of many individuals. We would like to thank the following educators, curators, and scholars who have contributed to its production: For consultation on the scholarly content, we are grateful to Art Institute curators Judy Barter, American Arts; Kathleen Bickford, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas; Stephen Little, Asian Art; Daniel Schulman, Twentieth-Century Painting and Sculpture; Sylvia Wolf, Photography; and Martha Wolfe, European Painting. Additional support was provided by members of the Department of Museum Education, including Susan Kuliak and Mary Kuzniar.

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Jean Sousa
Project Director,
Telling Images: Stories in Art
Chapter 1

*Saint George Killing the Dragon,*
1430/1435
Bernardo Martorell
(Spanish, about 1400–1452)
Tempera on panel
Gift of Mrs. Richard E. Danielson and Mrs. Chauncey McCormick,
1955.788
Saint George Killing the Dragon

Bernardo Martorell

Overview

Bernardo Martorell was one of the greatest artists of his time from Catalonia. In the middle ages, Spain was divided into separate kingdoms. The kingdom of Catalonia was in the northeastern region of present-day Spain.

Bernardo Martorell was the son of a butcher. He grew up in a small country village, and later worked in Barcelona, the most important Catalan city. He painted large and small works, and designed stained-glass windows, as well as vestments, clothing worn by priests during religious services. Martorell's son and grandson also became artists.

Saint George was a popular saint in medieval Europe where the knightly code of conduct emphasized heroism and courtly manners toward women. He became the patron saint of European soldiers and armorers, as well as the patron saint of Catalonia, Portugal, Russia, and England. April 23 is still celebrated regionally as Saint George's Day in some areas of Europe.

What's the Story?

The legend of the life of Saint George, who is seen in this painting, took place in Silena, a town in the present-day country of Libya in north Africa. According to medieval accounts, a horrible dragon living near the town poisoned everyone who passed by with his noxious breath. To calm the dragon, the
citizens of Silena first offered him two sheep a day, but when they began to run out of sheep, they offered him one sheep and one youth or maiden chosen by lottery. On the day the knight George arrived in the town, the king's daughter had drawn the unlucky lot. The knight offered to kill the dragon if the citizens (20,000 of them) would agree to be baptized as Christians. *Saint George Killing the Dragon* shows the knight defending the princess from the dragon, while the king and his remaining subjects watch from a distant castle.

Accounts of the lives of Christian saints were often written down by monks and elaborated by storytellers and artists. These stories were compiled in medieval Europe by a mid-thirteenth century Italian bishop named Jacobus de Voragine in his book *The Golden Legend*. This collection provided many of the details that appear in Bernardo Martorell's painting. Other details depicted by Martorell are found in a popular Catalan text from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, called *La historia de la vida de Sent Jordi* (The History of the Life of Saint George).
Why Is This Story Told on a Spanish Altarpiece?

Celebrating soldiers was important in the Middle Ages in Europe because feudal society was built on military allegiances. In Martorell’s day, military values were particularly honored on the Iberian peninsula (present-day Spain and Portugal), because the land was divided into Christian and Muslim kingdoms, which had been fighting each other for hundreds of years. The Reconquest, as Spanish Christians called it, was completed only in 1492, when the armies of King Ferdinand of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile — the joint rulers of Christian Spain — captured Granada, the last Iberian kingdom under Muslim control.

The knight had a special place in medieval culture in this context of constant warfare. Chivalry’s code of conduct, with its emphasis on heroism and courtly manners toward women, inspired high standards for knightly behavior. These standards were appealing to the Christian Church, which made the knighting ceremony a religious occasion with a church vigil and purifying bath. The story of the man who became Saint George is of a knight who acted according to the highest ideals of Christianity and chivalry, and therefore was featured in many works of medieval Christian art.

As the purpose of Christian altarpieces was to inspire and educate worshippers, depiction of the moving events of Saint George’s life and his eventual death for his Christian faith would have provided an appropriate example to the faithful. For the many Christians in the Middle Ages who could not read, altarpieces such as Saint George Killing the Dragon told the story of the triumph of good over evil and of the virtues of knighthood in a dramatic and satisfying way. In addition, Saint George’s story, told as though he were a Catalan knight fighting on behalf of his faith, enhanced the painting’s connection to the highly placed citizens of Catalonia, who commissioned the altarpiece.
In the early fifteenth century, the Diputacio, or Catalan parliament, began to renovate a series of modest houses in Barcelona into a magnificent municipal palace, the Palau de la Diputación. *Saint George Killing the Dragon* was probably commissioned for the palace's Chapel of Saint George, which still stands. **Masses** in such chapels were held to honor a community's patron saint and, through that patron, to help ensure the salvation of its members. Other images of Saint George, the patron saint of Catalonia, were also part of the chapel's decoration, including a sculpture of Saint George on the keystone of the vaulted chapel ceiling, and an embroidered altar frontal, a cloth cover for the front of the altar.
A Knight in Shining Armor

As many medieval artists did, Martorell painted the story’s participants in clothing of his time embellished with symbolic details, even though the story tells us that Saint George lived in the third century. Saint George wears a complete set of medieval armor called l’arnés blanc, “white armor” (although it was not always white). During the first half of the fifteenth century, the Catalan Consellers (councilors), who commissioned Saint George Killing the Dragon, ordered their armors to produce this type of suit for the region’s knights.

On Saint George’s head is an armet, a compact, visored helmet. Pauldrons, shoulder defenses, protect his chest and shoulder blades. Note that the right pauldron is shaped so that Saint George’s lance can be tucked under his arm when he is not in combat. Saint George wears long jointed gauntlets over his hands. Solid plates called tassets are attached to his breastplate with straps and buckles, to protect the gap at the top of the thigh armor. The entire suit is jointed so that the knight can move, but still be protected. Saint George also wears golden spurs, which only knights were allowed to wear. Thus, the armor and sword of Saint George, and his horse’s gear, identify him as a knight and a high-ranking member of medieval society.

A white vest called a huca was tied over the armor to identify individual knights and to protect the metal breastplate from overheating in the sun. The red cross on Saint George’s vest and on the cloth tied to his lance is his own symbol as well as that of the Diputacion, the parliament of Catalonia, and of those who had gone on Crusade to the Holy Land. The battles between Christians and Muslims for control of the kingdoms on the Iberian peninsula were considered to be part of a larger effort during the Middle Ages, in which Christian Europeans fought holy wars against people believed to be enemies of Christianity as well as to recover sites Christians considered holy.
Behind Saint George and the dragon is the princess identified as Cleodelinda in *The Golden Legend*, who wears an ermine and red cloak called a *hopa*, a fashionable robe with trailing sleeves from the early fifteenth century. She wears flowers and a crown decorated with jewels over her curly red hair, which is long and uncovered because she is still a maiden. According to the Catalan version of the Saint George story, her hands are clasped together in distress as she weeps in fear. The princess stands next to a grazing white ram who, in contrast to her, is oblivious to his fate as a sacrificial victim for the vicious dragon. In the Middle Ages, the color red symbolized sacrifice, while white symbolized purity. Both Saint George and the princess wear these two colors.

The King and Queen wait on the balcony of a castle decorated with banners. Typical of a medieval manor, it is circled by a moat that is sprinkled with swans and surrounded by walled orchards and gardens. The lush foliage suggests that it is summer. While some spectators are wearing turbans, suggesting non-Christians or foreigners, others wear contemporary Spanish clothing.
Saint George Killing the Dragon was the central panel of an altarpiece, flanked by four smaller panels, which are today in the Musée du Louvre in Paris. These panels show episodes from the saint’s martyrdom, including Saint George Dragged Through the Streets (upper left), his death by beheading, Decapitation (upper right), The Flagellation of Saint George (lower left), and The Judgment of Saint George by Dacian (lower right). Martorell chose these scenes from many other gory and dramatic events elaborated in the written accounts of the saint’s life, which tell of his being tortured to death and resurrected four times before his final beheading.

Above the central scene of Saint George Killing the Dragon there would have been another image (now lost) relating to an important event in the Christian faith, possibly the Crucifixion or the Coronation of the Virgin. Below the main images there would have been a series of smaller paintings (also lost), which supported the altarpiece and might have included depictions of other saints or other incidents from Saint George’s life. Surrounding all of the paintings would have been a guardapolvos, or dustguard, a carved frame that would probably have been painted with the coat-of-arms of the city or donor, and silver-gilt roses on a blue background, according to Catalan custom of the time.
Bernardo Martorell (c. 1400–1452)

Bernardo Martorell is considered to be the greatest Catalan painter of the first half of the fifteenth century. He was the son of a butcher from San Céloni, a small village in the kingdom of Catalonia. Martorell worked principally in Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia, from the 1420s to 1452. He painted altarpieces and miniatures and designed stained-glass windows and vestments. His son Bernardo II and grandson Juan also became painters.

How Was the Altarpiece Made?

A late medieval Spanish altarpiece was called a retablo or retable (ree-table), from the Latin retro tablum, meaning “behind the (altar) table.” Painting or sculpture behind the altar was popular from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries, when priests stood in front of the altar during religious ceremonies, instead of behind the altar as had been the earlier custom.

A formal contract was necessary to begin making an altarpiece. Negotiations between the Catalan government and Martorell would have included a visit by officials to the workshop to consult with Martorell, another meeting when Martorell presented a mostra, a sketch of the proposed work, a third meeting to approve the final design and price (which would be paid in three installments), and a final meeting with a notary to draw up the contract.

Saint George Killing the Dragon was made like most late medieval altarpieces. Martorell began with wood panels joined together, and covered them with a coating of white gesso (a chalk- or gypsum-based layer similar to plaster). Martorell shaped many of the features of the painting, especially the dragon and Saint George’s armor, in an unusually high amount of raised, modeled gesso called embutido. He painted on the gesso with tempera paint, made of minerals ground by hand in his workshop and bound together in a liquid medium such as
egg yolk. The gold in the painting came from thin, delicate sheets of gold leaf. To make haloes around the figures’ heads, Martorell used compasses to create the circles, added gesso to raise the surface, placed gold leaf over the gesso, then stamped in the patterns on the gold leaf with tools called punches. In the medieval chapel, the gold on the painting would catch the flickering candlelight, suggesting a heavenly glow around the figures.

Martorell painted in a style that we describe today as International Gothic. It was popular throughout Europe in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries and combines elegant figures and curving rhythms with careful observation of naturalistic detail in a manner that suggests the first stirrings of the Renaissance. Here, Martorell represented the walled gardens and orchards, the fly resting on a bone, and the reflections of the swans in the waters of the moat with great attention to texture and detail. At the same time, he did not try to reconcile the several different points of view within the painting — he depicted the castle and fields from a bird’s-eye view to include the most detail possible, while presenting Saint George straight on to create a clear and memorable image for the worshipper.
Glossary

Altar: An elevated table or structure upon which the Christian ceremony of the Mass, which commemorates the Last Supper, takes place.

Altarpiece: A painting or carving placed above and behind an altar.

Armet: A medieval light helmet with a neck guard and movable visor.

Barcelona: Capital city of the kingdom of Catalonia in northeastern Spain.

Catalan: The adjective describing things or people from Catalonia, Spain.

Chivalry: The medieval institution of knighthood and its qualities, such as bravery, courtesy, and honesty.

Crusades: Holy wars fought by Europeans from the eleventh through fifteenth centuries against people who were believed to be the enemies of Christianity and to recover sites considered holy by Christians.

Dacian: A Roman provincial governor during the reign of Diocletian (Gaius Aurelius Valerius Diocletianus, lived A.D. 245–313). Dacian was one of the magistrates of the Roman Republic, elected for a term of one year. In his duties of administering and enforcing the law, Dacian was known for persecuting Christians. There have been longstanding debates about whether Saint George is a historical figure or a legendary one, but in the Middle Ages he was believed to have suffered martyrdom on the orders of Dacian.

Feudal: The political and economic system in Europe from about the ninth to the fifteenth centuries. In this system, a
vassal held land in return for homage and service to his lord.

**Gauntlet:** A protective glove, sometimes with a cuff, worn with medieval armor.

**Gesso:** A mixture of chalk or gypsum and glue used as a surface for painting, or to build up low relief as in the dragon and Saint George’s halo in Saint George Killing the Dragon.

**Golden Legend:** A popular compendium of saints’ lives, written by Jacobus de Voragine in the thirteenth century.

**Halo:** A luminous ring of light surrounding the heads or bodies of sacred figures, such as saints, in religious paintings.

**Manor:** The lord’s residence or landed estate and the district over which he ruled in medieval western Europe.

**Martyrdom:** The state of being a martyr, a person who chooses to die, often after a great deal of suffering, rather than renounce religious beliefs.

**Mass:** The Christian ceremony that commemorates the Last Supper of Jesus with his Disciples. The Mass takes place in a church at the altar.

**Medieval:** Pertaining to the Middle Ages. Some scholars give the beginning of the Middle Ages the approximate date of A.D. 476, when Romulus Augustulus, the last emperor of the Western Roman Empire, was deposed. However, the new and distinct Western civilization, which is called medieval, developed from classical, Christian, and northern European cultures over a number of centuries. The Middle Ages is called by some the “age of faith,” because so many of the intellectual, artistic, technological, and economic achievements of these centuries developed through religious institutions. Gradually society, economies, and culture became more secular and humanistically oriented, progressing into the centuries that are today called the Renaissance. This transition happened at different times in different western European countries, although sometimes the closing date of the Middle Ages is given as A.D. 1455,
when Constantinople was conquered by the Turks.

**Pauldrons:** Shoulder defenses in medieval armor that protect the shoulder blades and chest.

**Retable:** A type of altarpiece that is distinguished by a structure that contains niches for lighting or ornaments, or a frame to enclose painted panels.

**Spurs:** A pair of spikes or spiked wheels attached to a rider’s heels used to urge the horse forward.

**Tassets:** Solid plates attached to the breastplate of medieval armor with straps and buckles, to protect the gap at the top of the thigh armor.

**Tempera:** A painting medium in which ground pigment is mixed with a water-soluble binder such as egg yolk.

**Vigil:** A defensive watch kept during normal sleeping hours, or a devotional watch observed on the eve of a religious festival.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*St. George Killing the Dragon* by Bernardo Martorell

✧ Name the things in the painting decorated with gold.

✧ If you had a choice, who in the painting would you like to be?

✧ Read the story of St. George and the Dragon below.

Find in the painting the characters mentioned in the story.
Tell your own version of an ending for the story.

*Outside the walls of a town there dwelt a horrible dragon. To calm the fury of this monster, each day the king, queen, and townspeople offered it one sheep and one person. The unfortunate person’s name was drawn in a lottery, and the lot for this day had fallen upon the daughter of the king.*

“Take ye my gold and my silver, and half my kingdom,” cried the king to his people, “but give back my daughter, that she may be spared so dreadful a death!” But no one would take her place, and the princess went and stood with a sheep before the dragon’s lair.

*St. George, wearing armor and the cross of a Christian knight, happened upon the princess. He asked the cause of her trouble. She replied, “Brave knight, get away with all speed, lest thou die the same death that awaits me!” “Be without fear,” said St. George, “for in the name of my church I will save thee!”*

*Suddenly, the dragon emerged from its lair. Under its wings were strewn the many bones of its past victims. St George, holding high his pointed lance, set bravely upon the dragon and...killed the monster with one blow!*

Another version of the story tells that St. George pinned the dragon to the ground and led the defeated beast to the king.
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Bernardo Martorell created *Saint George Killing the Dragon* with a paint called egg tempera.

**ART ACTIVITY:**

*Egg Tempera*

Create an egg tempera painting using colored chalk and eggs.

- Crush pastels or colored chalk into a fine powder. Put each powdered color in a paper cup.
- Mix the powdered color with water to achieve the consistency of paste.
- Separate the egg yolk from the egg white. Discard the white and keep the yolks in a glass jar.
- Mix an equal amount of yolk and the already mixed color in a clean paper cup.
- Using the egg tempera, paint your own version of “Saint George Killing the Dragon” or illustrate a scene from your favorite story.

NOTE: Egg tempera dries quickly. The colors should be used as soon as they are mixed. Because of the transparent quality of the paint, more than one coat of a color may be needed. The painting can be done on a small piece of white construction paper or illustration board (about 6"x9").
In order to create the altarpiece, Bernardo Martorell learned all of the stories about Saint George’s life. In the middle ages, these stories were also acted out in the courtyard of the local church on Saint George’s Day and other festive occasions.

**WRITING ACTIVITY:**

*A Script for Saint George and the Dragon*

Write your own play based on the characters, the action, and the setting found in the painting.

- Choose the villain, the victim, and the hero. Write dialogue for each character.
- Include the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story.

**COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY:**

*Act it Out*

Produce a play using one of the scripts written by the students. Different students can be responsible for different aspects of the production.

- Create the set. Choose students to draw or paint scenery on large pieces of paper.
- Make costumes for the actors. Choose students to make costume elements such as Saint George’s armor or the dragon’s tail.
- Choose actors for the play.
Student Bibliography (Grades 2-8)


Teacher Bibliography


Chapter 2

Statue of a Standing Vishnu, 16th century
India, Tanjore District
Late Vijayanagar Period
Bronze
Robert Allerton Collection,
1969.699
**Statue of a Standing Vishnu**

*Tanjore, India*

**Overview**

Vishnu is a deity or god in the Indian religion, Hinduism, which has been practiced for over 4,000 years. This statue of Vishnu was made to stand in a Hindu temple. The statue was made toward the end of the Vijayanagar period (1356-1565) in India’s history. Based in southern India, the Vijayanagar Empire was the center of Hindu culture for over two hundred years. Vijayanagar, capital of the Empire, means “City of Victory.”

The Hindu religion is centered around three main gods: Brahma, the creator; Shiva, the destroyer; and Vishnu, the preserver of universal order. Vishnu is kind and concerned for the happiness of human beings under his care. To help him preserve order in the world, Vishnu has the unique ability to change form. Whenever the forces of evil threaten to overcome the forces of goodness, Vishnu descends from heaven as an avatar — an earthly being who can solve the problem and rescue the world.

There are ten avatars of Vishnu, two of which appear in the great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The stories were written down around 400 A.D., although they are probably much older.

**What’s the Story?**

Religious concepts and narratives related to *Statue of a Standing Vishnu* appear in ancient Indian epics or puranas, “the stories of the olden days,” which originated around 1000 B.C. These early texts are written in Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hinduism, which evolved in the second millennium B.C. The stories celebrate religion, glorify deities, and
teach listeners or readers in order to strengthen their faith. Many puranas are associated with the god Vishnu, the preserver of universal order and one of the three gods at the top of the Hindu pantheon.

Whenever Vishnu is needed on earth to solve a problem or to restore order, he appears as an avatar either in animal form (fish, tortoise, boar, and lion) or in a human form (Krishna, Buddha, and Rama). Vishnu’s avatars Rama and Krishna appear in the two great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, each composed around 400 A.D. Like the other gods at the top of the pantheon — Brahma, the creator, and Shiva, the destroyer and regenerator of the universe — Vishnu has wives, offspring, and favorite animals, and pursues adventures in the world. The only god in the pantheon who has no beginning and no end, Vishnu is the most lovable of the gods. He is kind, considerate, and ever-vigilant for the happiness of human beings under his care.

The ten avatars of Vishnu originated in myths of creators, saviors, heroes, and historical and apocalyptic figures. The stories invoked by the symbolism of Statue of a Standing Vishnu incorporate elements of India’s cultural history and values.
India and the Hindu Religion

India, a subcontinent of Asia, has one of the oldest civilizations in the world. One-fifth of the world's population is of Indian descent, and a majority of these people practice the Hindu religion. More than 4,000 years old, Hindu beliefs and practices revolve around three divinities: Brahma, the creator and god of wisdom; Shiva, the destroyer and regenerator; and Vishnu, the preserver of universal order. In addition to temple worship, essential acts of Hindu spirituality include personal devotion in the home, pilgrimages to sacred places, and participation in sacred festivals.

The activities of the gods and the lives of humans are linked together continually in the Hindu concept of the cyclical nature of time. In this cycle, the universe is destroyed by fire and is dissolved into a cosmic ocean out of which a new universe is created and another cosmic era begins. Although unable to picture the entire cycle of time or the entire universe, humans are thought to possess immortal souls that are reincarnated in higher or lower human, animal, and vegetable forms. The type of reincarnation depends on a person's karma, his or her good or bad actions over a lifespan. Every Hindu aspires to moksha (or nirvana), an escape from the endless cycle of rebirth in the present world, whereby the soul achieves transcendence and the end of suffering. Worshipping a deity such as Vishnu is essential to becoming free of this cycle.

The City of Victory and Its Empire

Statue of a Standing Vishnu was completed in the sixteenth century, during the Vijayanagar period (about 1336–1565) of Indian history. Based in southern India, the Vijayanagar Empire exerted power over the entire country and was the center of Hindu culture. The capital of the Empire was Vijayanagar, "the City of Victory," an enormous fortified city on the banks of the Tungabhadra River. Almost twenty-four miles around, this garden-city was ringed by seven concentric walls. The city contained marble palaces, colossal elephant stables
made of stone, ladies' pavilions, baths, bazaars, and hundreds of temples. Italian, Persian, Portuguese, and Russian visitors commented with awe on the city's many lakes, waterways, and fruit gardens. Vijayanagar was a center for trade in pearls and coral, elephants and horses, camphor, pepper, sandalwood, and musk. The sophistication and power of Vijayanagar is reflected in other southern cities such as Tanjore, where the Statue of a Standing Vishnu was made. Tanjore was the capital of the Chola Empire (907–1356), and many of the magnificent temples built during that time remain today. In addition to its architecture, Tanjore was well-known for its paintings and cast-bronze sculptures.

Statue of a Standing Vishnu was created in the last years of the Vijayanagar Empire. The Muslim kingdoms of the Deccan, located in central India, united to defeat the Hindus. In 1565 Vijayanagar was sacked during the Battle of Talikota. In the months following the battle, most of the city's hundreds of temples, sculptures, and gardens were completely destroyed.
The Stories of Vishnu’s Avatars

In describing himself to Arjuna, the hero of the *Mahabharata*, Vishnu remarks, “Whenever Truth decays and untruth flourishes, O noble one, then I create myself. To protect the righteous and destroy the wicked, to establish Truth firmly, I take birth age after age.”

1. *Vishnu as the Fish*

One day Manu (man-oo), “Father of Man,” was washing himself by a river. He found a tiny fish, Matsya (mat-see-ah), in the hollow of his palm. Matsya was the god Vishnu in disguise, and he asked Manu to save him. The small fish grew quickly, and soon he was so big Manu could no longer keep him. Manu said good-bye and returned the fish to the ocean. Upon his release, the fish told Manu that in one year a great flood would submerge the world, and he urged Manu to build a ship in preparation. The flood came in precisely one year, as Matsya had said. Matsya returned during the flood to guide Manu’s ship through the waters to safe ground. After the flood, Manu created new plants, animals, and people for the earth.

2. *Vishnu as the Tortoise*

Long ago, many floods destroyed the world. Precious things were lost, including the heavenly nectar *amrita*, or cream of the milk ocean, which the gods ate so that they would live forever. Without the cream of the milk ocean, the world and the gods would die.

The gods and demons came together to make the cream of the milk ocean. Mount Mandara was turned upside down so that it could be used as a churning stick to stir up the water. The snake Vasuki (va-soo-kee) was employed as a rope to turn the mountain. The mountain was so heavy it began to burrow into the earth as it turned, making the earth tremble and fall apart. The gods and demons called out for the help of Vishnu.
Vishnu became Kurma, the tortoise, and then used his curved back as a pivot on which the mountain could rest. Gods and demons worked very hard together to churn the ocean. Soon, they were able to make the cream of the milk ocean. Then all of the lost, precious objects rose up out of the milky water.

3.  **Vishnu as the Boar**

Near the dawn of time, the Earth was born. The newborn Earth, in the form of a lovely young woman, was floating on the Cosmic Sea when she was suddenly attacked. The Serpent of the Abyss, which is a very deep hole, dragged Earth beneath the waters. Earth cried out to Vishnu to save her. Vishnu, hearing her desperate cries, became Varaha, a boar. Boars are fierce creatures of the land that also delight in water. Varaha plunged into the Cosmic Sea, lifted Earth up on his large tusks, and returned Earth to her home above the waters.

4.  **Vishnu as the Man-Lion**

There was once a demon king called Hiranyakashipu (hrih-ranya-kash-yapoo), who was so powerful that he could not be killed “by day or night, by man or beast, by no man-made weapon, either inside or outside his palace, nor on the earth or in the skies.” Thus protected, he terrorized the three worlds. The demon king was so powerful he scared everyone, even his young son.

The demon king’s only worry was that his son worshipped Vishnu. This worry made the king so unhappy that the son was afraid his father would kill him. Vishnu decided to save the boy and bring peace to the people who feared the king.

Vishnu became Narasimha, a creature who is half-man/half-lion who is “neither man nor beast.” He hid inside a pillar on the porch of the demon’s palace which is “neither inside nor outside.” At twilight which is “neither day nor night,” Narasimha burst forth from the pillar, seized the demon king in the palace doorway, stretched him across his lap, which is “neither on earth nor in the skies” and killed him with his claws.
5. **Vishnu as the Dwarf**

At one time, Bali the demon king controlled the earth. Vishnu decided to fool the demon king. Vishnu became Vamana (vah-man-ah), the dwarf. Vamana asked Bali if he could have as much space as he could cover in three steps. Believing that the dwarf could cover only a small space, Bali agreed. Then Vamana turned himself into a great giant. His first step covered the entire earth. His second and third steps covered the heavens. Nothing was left for the demon king to rule but the world of the afterlife.

6. **Vishnu as Parasurama**

One day a powerful warrior king named Kshatriya (kshat-ree-ah) visited the home of Jamadagni (jah-mah-dahg-nee), a strict Brahman hermit of the priestly class. Jamadagni and his family lived a very simple life. When the warrior king saw Jamadagni’s wonderful cow, he decided to take it for himself. Jamadagni and his family tried to get the cow back. By accident, Jamadagni was killed by the warrior king’s sons.

Vishnu decided to help Jamadagni’s family and, at the same time, to restore on earth the power of the priestly class over the warrior class. Vishnu became Parasurama (para-shoo-rama), the youngest and most obedient son in Jamadagni’s family. In revenge for his father’s death, Parasurama killed the warrior king’s entire family, thus restoring order.

7. **Vishnu as Rama**

Vishnu had many adventures as the brave and daring Prince Rama, “destroyer of the wicked.” Prince Rama, his wife Sita, and his brother Lakshmana were banished to the forest for fourteen years upon the demand of Rama’s stepmother. Rama and his family constantly defended themselves against the demons who also lived in the forest.

One day, Sita was kidnapped by Ravana, demon king of Sri Lanka. Rama went to Hanuman, king of the monkeys, to ask
for help in finding his wife. The monkeys searched for Sita east and west, north and south. Finally, Hanuman spied Rama’s wife hidden in a grove of trees in the demon king’s palace garden. Rama and the monkeys attacked the demons, killing Ravana and his mighty warriors in order to free Sita. After a long time, Rama and his family were able to come home to rule over his kingdom Ayodhya (ah-yod-hee-a). This was a time of justice, peace, and happiness.

8. **Vishnu as Krishna**

Vishnu had many adventures as the loving, playful, and wise god Krishna. One day the young Krishna was playing ball near the Yamuna River, and the ball bounced into the water. It landed near the many-headed, giant cobra Kaliya, who lived in the Yamuna River. The snake was so poisonous that no trees or birds could live near the river.

In order to retrieve the ball, Krishna climbed up a tree and dived into the river. The cobra immediately began to fight with Krishna. Krishna stomped so hard on Kaliya with his feet, Krishna’s footprint was marked forever on the cobra’s head. Soon Kaliya became faint from the many blows. Krishna told Kaliya he had to leave the pool and go live in the ocean. After the poisonous snake had gone, the water and the land again became safe for trees and birds.

9. **Vishnu as Buddha**

At the beginning of the present age, many people were talking about Vishnu in strange ways. He decided to come to earth as Buddha.

Buddha was born as Prince Siddhartha into the rich and noble Gautama family. He grew up in luxury and pleasure, and he was married for many years to the beautiful Yasodhara (yah-show-dah-rah), with whom he had a son. One day, Buddha slipped out of the palace and saw that others lived with sickness, old age, and death. In order to find the meaning of these
“three sorrows,” Buddha decided to leave his home and family and pursue the life of a religious man.

Buddha began a pilgrimage lasting seven years that involved learning, thinking, and preaching. He realized that in order to be free of the cycle of rebirth, he had to meditate and lead a simple life.

10. Vishnu as Kalki

Vishnu will appear as Kalki sometime in the future. When he comes, Kalki will ride a white horse through the world. He will raise his arm high with a sword in his hand. The sword will blaze like a comet, and Kalki will destroy the world. Then Kalki will sleep on the Cosmic Sea for a long, long time. When he wakes up, Kalki will stir the milky waters. The god Brahma the Creator will be reborn. The earthly world will begin to grow and play again, and this future time will be a new Golden Age.

How Is Vishnu Presented in This Sculpture?

Statue of a Standing Vishnu presents Vishnu in human form rather than as one of his avatars. Though the statue was painted to look lifelike, it has four arms to symbolize Vishnu's supernatural powers. In his upper hands, Vishnu carries attributes that identify him. In his upper left hand, he holds a conch shell, a war horn that symbolizes the origins of existence, sky, and sound. In his upper right hand, he holds a chakra or discus, a flaming weapon that symbolizes the wheel of time, the cycles of
life, the universe, and world order. Another wheel appears on the back of Vishnu’s head. A third attribute of Vishnu, the mace, is not shown on this sculpture.

Vishnu’s two lower hands make gestures, called mudras, found in Indian dance. Vishnu’s lower right hand makes the gesture of granting blessing, protection, and reassurance. On the right side of Vishnu’s chest is a small, triangular-shaped mole called a shrivatsu, which shows that he is the favorite of the goddess Shri-Lakshmi, one of his wives. Vishnu wears a kirita-mukuta, a tall crown that symbolizes his status as the absolute, universal monarch. A typical component of male dress, his belt, or katibandha, is here decorated with a lion’s head. His necklaces, bracelets, waistbands and hip girdles are pieces of jewelry worn by all the gods.

Hanging over Vishnu’s shoulder is the three-part sacrificial cord called the yajnopavita. This cord consists of three intertwined strands of fabric or antelope hide, and it may be decorated with jewels or flowers. The three strands symbolize reality, passion, and inertia. The cord, which is as long as an adult man, is given to every boy in the three highest castes during a ceremony that takes place when he becomes an adolescent. Following this ceremony, the boy is considered to be reborn as a man. All of the gods, male and female, wear this three-strand cord.

Vishnu stands on a lotus flower. The lotus, which grows from the muddy depths of the water, is a heliotropic flower that opens with the sun and closes in the darkness. The stem of the lotus symbolizes the idea that all of life comes from water. The leaf symbolizes the fertile earth, and the flower represents a mother’s lap. When the bud is open, it symbolizes the sun. Together, all parts of the lotus flower symbolize beauty, happiness, eternal renewal, and, more specifically, the Hindu belief in moksha, the liberation of the spirit from the cycle of reincarnation. Brahma, the god of creation, is believed to have been created from the lotus in Vishnu’s navel. Vishnu is believed to live in his own heaven, Vaikuntha, whose buildings are built of gold studded with jewels and whose pools contain lotus flowers of all hues, which perfume the air for miles around.
Where Was This Statue Originally Seen?

Statue of a Standing Vishnu would have been located in a temple built according to directions given in the Agamas or Shastras, sacred texts that govern the proportions of buildings and images. Every temple has a principal sculpture, an immovable image generally made of stone or occasionally of wood, stucco, or other materials. As part of temple worship, images of the deities are carried in procession outside the temple’s walls. Smaller, portable metal images such as Statue of a Standing Vishnu are created for this purpose. These portable statues are placed directly in front of the principal image that remains in the temple until they are needed for a procession. Like the principal statue, Statue of a Standing Vishnu would have been blessed by a priest and worshipped in temple ceremonies. Vishnu himself is thought to live in all of his images.

The Agamas texts specify three essential forms of worship: daily worship, daily festivals, and annual or great festivals. Worshippers to the temples containing statues follow the custom of puja, which involves offering incense, camphor, coconuts, and garlands to a deity. The worshipper walks around the outside of the shrine in a clockwise direction, then enters and travels through a sequence of small, low rooms. When the sanctum with the god is reached, offerings, lighted lamps, and money are given to a priest, who presents them to the god. Most of these offerings are then reverentially returned to the worshipper, and coconut water is sometimes spooned out to him or her. Bells sound and conch-shell trumpets blow at the moment the worshipper makes eye contact with the deity. With this act, the ceremony concludes.

For holy processions and festivals, statues such as Statue of a Standing Vishnu are bedecked in jewels and wrapped in clothes, which often obscure the deity’s face. A rod is passed through holes in the base of the sculpture so that the image can be carried out of the temple.
Dance is an important part of worship associated with works such as *Statue of a Standing Vishnu*, both within and outside the temple. Many Hindu statues look graceful and agile like dancers, because almost all body gestures in Hindu sculpture come from the art of Indian dance. Some of the great Hindu temples include sacred dancing halls to worship the gods. Dance and music accompany the procession of the statue outside the temple during festivals. The act of carrying an image is choreographed so that the movements are suited to the deity and to the occasion. Through processions and festivals, the sacred temple, the immediate community, and the cosmos are symbolically linked together.

**How Was Statue of a Standing Vishnu Made?**

*Statue of a Standing Vishnu* is assumed to have been made by an artist who worked in a guild. This person probably specialized in bronze sculpture and belonged to one of the lower castes. Artists were not necessarily religious, and they often used courtesans and other celebrities of their time as models. Artists were usually paid in money and sometimes with land.

Since bronze sculptures are an integral part of the temples in which they are housed, they are made with a particular temple's architecture in mind. Hence, a sculpture made for one temple cannot be used for another. Sculptures are rarely inscribed, and when they are, donors' names rather than the artist's are given.

*Statue of a Standing Vishnu* was made by the lost-wax method of casting. The artist sculpts the figure in clay and covers it with a thin layer of wax and another of semiliquid clay. Vent pipes are then inserted at various points through the clay and wax layers. When the clay figure and the wax and clay layers are heated, the wax between the clay surfaces melts and runs out through the vent pipes. Molten bronze is then poured into
the gap left by the melted wax. When the metal is cool, the clay cover and inner core are removed, leaving the bronze statue.

The bronze used for *Statue of a Standing Vishnu* is an alloy of gold, silver, copper, lead, and tin. According to some versions of the *Agamas* sacred texts, gold is for enjoyment in this world and the next, silver is for wealth, and copper is for prosperity. In other texts, gold is for victory, health, and knowledge; silver is for wealth; and copper is for well-being.

**India and Chicago**

The peoples and culture of India were little known in Chicago until the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition. During the Exposition, India had its own building in which visitors could sample Indian tea served in hand-painted dishes by attendants from India. Carpets, brass and copper objects, and antique armor inlaid with gems were included in the Exposition collection, which was then valued at hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Of greater long-term impact was the arrival in the United States of Swami Vivekananda, the first Hindu monk from India to teach *Vedanta*, a branch of Indian philosophy, in this country. Swami Vivekananda gave a speech on September 11, 1893, the opening day of the World’s Parliament of Religions, held in conjunction with the Exposition. The Parliament met in the Art Institute’s 1893 building fronting on Michigan Avenue. Vivekananda stayed in the United States for about four years, contributing substantially to the new dialogue between Eastern and Western religions. Today, there are twelve *Vedanta* Societies in America, including one in Hyde Park in south Chicago. A wall plaque outside Fullerton Auditorium at the Art Institute commemorates Swami Vivekananda’s famous speech, and the block of Michigan Avenue in front of the Art Institute was given the honorary name of Swami Vivekananda Way in 1995.
People from India only began arriving in Chicago in great numbers in the 1960s. Between 1800 and 1965, 16,000 Indians emigrated to the United States. In 1965, the United States' immigration policy changed, giving priority to people with special skills, and to close relatives of United States residents. According to the 1990 census, between 1965 and 1990, the number of Indians in Chicago and its six surrounding counties grew to 58,000, out of a total of 469,000 Indian émigrés to the United States. This Indian community, comprising not only Hindus but also Muslims, Parsis, Jains, Sikhs, Christian denominations, and Jews, reflects the many cultures and traditions of India. The first Indian immigrants settled on the North Side of Chicago in Rogers Park, and in the western suburb of Oak Park; their descendants today are spread throughout most of the city and its suburbs.
Glossary

**Alloy:** A substance composed of two or more metals that have been combined.

**Attribute:** An object or symbol that identifies a deity and that is often held in the hand. Vishnu’s attributes are the conch shell, discus, mace, and lotus.

**Avatar:** A form or incarnation in which Vishnu appears in the earthly world to combat evil and restore order. Vishnu appears as ten avatars, including types of animals (fish, tortoise, boar), mythical creatures (man-lion, dwarf-giant), warrior heroes (Parasurama), other religious figures (Krishna, Buddha, and Rama), and as Kalki (symbol of the end of the world).

**Brahma:** The god of creation, who is believed to have been created from the lotus in Vishnu’s navel. He is one of the three main gods of Hinduism.

**Brahman:** A priest. The highest of the four main classes of Hindu society.

**Camphor:** A kind of wood whose sap is crystallized and used for many things, including insect repellent, expectorants, and stimulants.

**Caste:** One of four hereditary classes into which Hindu society is divided. Each caste is separated from the others by guidelines about occupation and marriage.

**Chakra:** A flaming discus or wheel that is an attribute of Vishnu. This weapon symbolizes the wheel of time, the cycles of life, the universe, and world order.

**Chola:** A dynasty in southern India (907–1356). The bronze art from this dynasty influenced the style of *Statue of a Standing Vishnu.*
Conch shell: A spiral-shaped sea shell symbolizing the origins of existence because of its form and connection to water and sound. Since it expands in a clockwise direction, the shell also symbolizes infinite space. The sound made by blowing through the shell is believed to keep demons away, and the shell was often used as a war horn.

Epic: An extended narrative poem celebrating heroic episodes of a people's history.

Guild: A society of artisans who train and work together, and who establish professional standards. Bronze casters worked in organized guilds in India at the time that Statue of a Standing Vishnu was made.

Heliotropic: Turning toward or away from the sun.

Hindu: Originally, the Persian word for people who lived on the subcontinent of India. Since the nineteenth century, the term has been used to refer to believers in Hinduism.

Hinduism: The English term for the religious tradition practiced by many people of India. This tradition involves the worshipping of several divinities and the reading of the Vedas, sacred texts deriving from the Indo-Aryan oral tradition (about 1500–1000 B.C.).

Inertia: Resistance to motion, action, or change.

Karma: The good or bad actions of a human being in one lifespan, which directly affects how his or her soul is reborn.

Katibandha: A belt worn by men.

Kirita-mukuta: A tall crown symbolizing Vishnu’s status as the universal, absolute monarch.
**Lost-wax:** A method of casting metal. The artist sculpts the figure in clay and then covers it with a thin layer of wax and another of clay. Vent pipes are inserted at various points through the wax and clay layers. When the clay figure and the wax and clay layers are heated, the wax melts between the clay surfaces and runs out through the vent pipes. Molten liquid bronze is then poured into the gap left by the melted wax. When the metal is cool, the clay cover and inner core are removed, leaving the statue.

**Lotus:** A heliotropic flower growing from the muddy depths of the water that opens with the sun and closes in the darkness. The lotus symbolizes the Hindu belief in moksha.

**Mace (gada):** A heavy club or ceremonial staff that is an attribute of Vishnu. It symbolizes authority and the power of knowledge as the essence of life.

**Mahabharata:** One of the two great Hindu epics, which was composed circa 400–200 B.C. The Bhagavad Gita, “Song of the Lord,” is one of the sections. Krishna, the eighth avatar of Vishnu, is the hero.

**Moksha (nirvana):** An escape from the endless cycle of rebirth in the present world, whereby a soul achieves transcendence and the end of suffering.

**Mudra:** Position of the hands and fingers in Indian dance.

**Myth:** A traditional story that features supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes. Myths may embody cultural ideals, ideology, or explanations of aspects of the world.

**Purana:** An ancient Indian epic, or “story of the olden days.”

**Pantheon:** All of the gods of a people.
Puja: Religious rituals held in temples involving the offering of incense, camphor, coconuts, and garlands to a deity. The rituals are meant to promote the well-being of the deity, and may be accompanied by the reading of sacred texts and the reciting of prayers.

Ramayana: One of the two great Hindu epics, composed circa 400–200 B.C. Prince Rama, the seventh avatar of Vishnu, is the hero.

Sanctum: The most holy room of a temple or place of worship.

Sanskrit: The classical language of India.

Shiva: The god who is the destroyer and regenerator. He is one of the three main gods in the Hindu religion.

Srivatsu: A small, triangular mole showing that Vishnu is the favorite of the goddess Shri-Lakshmi, one of his wives.

Vaikuntha: Vishnu's own heaven, whose buildings are built of gold studded with jewels, and whose pools contain lotus flowers of all hues, which perfume the air for miles around.

Vedanta: A system of Hindu philosophy emanating from the idea that all of reality is centered around a single principle, Brahman. Vedanta teaches that the believer should strive to transcend the limitations of self-identity and to realize his or her unity with Brahman.

Vijayanagar period (about 1356–1565): Based in southern India, the Vijayanagar Empire exerted power over the entire country and was the center of Hindu culture. The capital of the Empire was Vijayanagar, “the City of Victory,” an enormous fortified city on the banks of the Tungabhadra River. The city was destroyed in 1565.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Statue of a Standing Vishnu
Read these stories out loud and ask the following questions.

Vishnu as the Boar, (p.43)
• Who attacked the newborn Earth?
• What animal did Vishnu become to save the Earth?
• How did Varaha lift the Earth out of the Cosmic Sea?

Vishnu as the Dwarf, (p.44)
• What is the name of the demon king that ruled the earth?
• Describe how Yamana tricked the demon king.
• What was the only thing left for the demon king to rule?

Vishnu as Krishna, (p.45)
• What poisonous animal lived in the Yamuna River?
• How did Krishna defeat Kaliya?
• What returned to the water and lands after the death of Kaliya?

Mudras are hand gestures which play an important role in Hindu art and dance in India. Each mudra has a special meaning. Try these mudra positions.

This mudra represents the second avatar of Vishnu, Kurma, (the tortoise.) The thumbs and two fingers are the tortoise’s legs.

This mudra means wisdom.

This mudra means blessing, protection, and reassurance.

This mudra represents the first avatar of Vishnu, Matsya, (the fish). The outstretched thumbs are fins of the fish.
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Vishnu appears as an avatar every time he is needed to solve a problem. Many of the stories about Vishnu tell of the steps he took to solve the problem and restore order in the world.

ART ACTIVITY: Comic Book

Choose a story of one of the avatars of Vishnu and illustrate it in comic-book form.

- Design the look of the avatar of Vishnu and the other characters in the story you have chosen.

- Include speech bubbles with character dialogue.

- Use the comic-book panel format to tell the story from beginning to end.

WRITING ACTIVITY: Another Avatar

- Write a story about a problem on the earth.

- Create another avatar for Vishnu who can solve the problem, and finish the story with the new avatar's solution to the problem.

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY: Dance

Vishnu's body gestures are inspired by the art of Indian dance. With music and gestures, make Vishnu and his avatars "come to life."

- Gather together recorders, tambourines, and other musical instruments.

- Think about the personality and physical appearance of some of the avatars. What musical instrument and type of movement would best represent Vishnu as Matsya, Varaha, etc.? What would best represent Statue of a Standing Vishnu?
Student Bibliography (Grades 2-8)


“India.” *Calliope, World History for Young People*, vol. 5, no. 4 (March/April 1993).


**Teacher Bibliography**

**Hinduism**


**India**


**Bronze Sculptures of India**


**Music**

**Vishnu**


**Asian Indians in Chicago**
Chapter 3

Royal Altar Tusk
Mid-19th Century
Africa, Nigeria, Kingdom of Benin; Edo People
Ivory
Gift of Mr. and Mrs.
Edwin Hokin, 1976.523
Royal Altar Tusk

Kingdom of Benin, Africa

Overview

The royal art of the Kingdom of Benin provides an artistic and historical record going back 500 years. The majority of the kingdom’s people are known as Edo. In the Edo language, Oba means king. According to Edo oral tradition, the Oba descended from divine ancestors. Because he is semi-divine, the Oba possesses spiritual powers that affect the entire kingdom. Through him spirits of the ancestors continue to protect the Edo people and to insure a prosperous future.

When an Oba dies, one of his sons inherits the throne. Among his first acts, the new Oba establishes a royal altar in honor of his father. He then commissions craftsmen to create works of art for the altar to glorify both his father and other great Obas of the past. The Art Institute’s tusk was made for Oba Adolo who ruled in the 1860s, about the same time that Abraham Lincoln was president of the United States.

As part of a royal altar, a carved elephant’s tusk is mounted on a brass pedestal shaped like the crowned head of an Oba and then placed on a semicircular platform. The tusk provides a link between the living world of man and the spiritual world of the ancestors. An ivory tusk represents wealth and purity, and it also suggests the strength, endurance, power, longevity, and wisdom of elephants.
What’s the Story?

Benin ivory tusks tell stories of the Kingdom of Benin, which is led by its ruler, the Oba (oh-bah). In the past, the Edo (eh-doh) people didn’t use a written language, and thus employed pictures and the spoken word to tell their history. Their imagery and oral histories present time and human accomplishments as a rhythmic pattern of days, seasons, and years. Important symbols pass from generation to generation, their visual continuity emphasizing the endurance of the Kingdom of Benin.

Carved ivory altar tusks are made as pairs and are commissioned by a new Oba to honor his immediate predecessor, his deceased father. This tusk was commissioned by Oba Adolo (ah-doh-loh), who ruled around the same time that Abraham Lincoln was president of the United States. Oba Adolo’s half-sister Aghayubini (ag-hah-you-bin-ee), who was celebrated during her lifetime for her wisdom and diplomacy, chose Adolo from among his brothers to be Oba when their father Osemwende (oh-sem-wen-day) died. Thus, this tusk honors Oba Osemwende. Many of the tusk’s images refer to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Benin, a prosperous period in the kingdom’s history.
The Kingdom of Benin

The Kingdom of Benin is located in the tropical rain forest of southern Nigeria in West Africa. It sits on a sandy coastal plain west of the Niger River and north of the swamps and creeks of the Niger Delta. The majority of the kingdom's inhabitants are known as Edo, which is also the name of their language. In the past, some Igbo, Ijaw, Yoruba, and Itsekiri people also lived within Benin's borders. Outside of the capital, Benin City, are several hundred towns and villages with an average population of 400 to 500 people each. The Edo principally farm yams, timber, and rubber.

The Oba, the ruler of Benin, is the central figure in the kingdom. According to Benin oral history, the present royal dynasty was founded about 1300 A.D. by the son of a deified king. This
prince came to Benin from the city of Ife, the ancient cultural, religious, and artistic capital of the Yoruba people. The Oba is therefore considered divine. The Edo believe that he can personally control the forces that affect the well-being of the entire kingdom. He is the channel through which the powers of his ancestors vitalize and protect the Edo and ensure their survival. Carved ivory tusks are among the numerous objects that help the Oba maintain a close connection with his ancestors and that help him serve as an intermediary between the earthly and spiritual worlds.

The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which are highlighted on this tusk, were powerful years for the kingdom. Benin’s boundaries were at their widest and the kingdom conducted trade with many people including European merchants, mainly Portuguese, Dutch, and English. While a few Benin objects appeared in early European collections in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was not until the late nineteenth century, when the British used military force to exile the Oba and colonize the kingdom, that many objects left Benin. Despite a decade of political turmoil at the beginning of the twentieth century, a new Oba of Benin was enthroned in 1914. His descendant, Oba Erediauwa (er-eh-dee-ah-wah), the thirty-eighth and current Oba of Benin, presides over a court, participates in traditional rituals, and commissions works of art from his guilds of artists.

What Images Are on the Tusk?

The images on the Royal Altar Tusk should be “read” from bottom to top. The figures on the tusk’s lower part are historical personages accompanied by symbols of power, while those on its upper part represent officials who typically help the Oba with sacred ceremonies.
Telling Stories From the Royal Altar Tusk

Oba Ewuare: The Leopard and the Viper (row 2)

Before Ewuare (eh-war-ay) became Oba, the young man lived deep in the forest to escape the people who had executed his father, Oba Ohen (oh-hen). He camped for a long time with his friends, and slept in secret places to hide from his enemies.

One night Ewuare fell asleep under a large tree. He awoke when he felt liquid drip on his face. A leopard in the tree above him was eating its prey in the night. Horrified, Ewuare then looked down and discovered that he was sleeping on a huge, coiled viper, a poisonous snake. Able to flee both the leopard and viper, Ewuare felt very fortunate and began to see his escape as a sign.

The Edo people believe that a viper is lucky, and it did, in fact, bring good luck to Ewuare. The Edo people also say that a leopard is like a king, so Ewuare believed that someday he would become the Oba. When he finally did become the Oba, he became so powerful that he is known to this day as “Oba Ewuare the Great,” and the viper and the leopard are among his symbols.

Oba Ewuare and Olokun, God of the Sea (row 2)

Legend has it that the mid-fifteenth-century Oba, Ewuare (eh-war-ay) the Great, traveled to the coast of Benin in search of Olokun (oh-law-kun), god of the sea and a son of the High God. Olokun ruled the rivers and ocean, and he was very rich. When Ewuare arrived at the coast, he dove deep under the water. The first thing he saw was Olokun’s undersea palace glowing with mirrors, ivory, and polished brass. Then Ewuare saw Olokun, who wore a tall crown and wonderful clothes made of red coral beads. The two great rulers challenged each other to a contest of strength and quick wit. Ewuare was so clever that he won Olokun’s respect.
Ewuare took home many treasures. He took a tall helmet crown made entirely of red coral beads, and shirts and wrappers made of coral netting, just like those Olokun wore. He also took some magical brass containers called *iru* (ee-roo) that could talk. Ewuare built a new palace in the style of Olokun’s palace of mirrors, ivory, and brass, and he dressed himself in Olokun’s fancy clothes. Then Ewuare ruled the land just as powerfully as Olokun ruled the waters.

**Oba Ewuare and his Coral Crown (rows 3, 4, 5)**

When Oba Ewuare (eh-war-ay) returned from beneath the sea, he put on Olokun’s tall helmet crown and coral clothes. He soon realized that Olokun’s crown was very heavy. Oba Ewuare was not strong enough to wear the crown by himself, so he asked every man, woman, and child in the kingdom to help him carry his crown. He invented four daily greetings to remind them of this important job:

“*Ob-Owie (ohb ow-wee-ay)*
— *Help me carry it in the morning,*
*Be King of the Morning!*

“*Ob-Avan (ohb ah-vahn)*
— *Help me carry it in the afternoon,*
*Be King of the Afternoon!*

“*Ob-Ota (ohb oh-tah)*
— *Help me carry it in the evening,*
*Be King of the Evening!*

“*Ob-Ason (ohb ah-sahn)*
— *Help me carry it in the night,*
*Be King of the Night!*

And that is why no Oba can lead a nation without the help of his people.
Oba Ohen (row 5)

Oba Ohen (oh-hen), Ewuare’s father, was paralyzed in his legs. Although unable to support his weight, the Oba’s legs had strength of another kind. If his feet touched wet ground, nothing would grow there ever again. The supernatural power of Oba Ohen’s legs was as dangerous as the electric shock of a mudfish, which can kill with a touch.

Oba Ohen selfishly tried to hide these supernatural powers from the Edo people. When the people sent a representative to learn the truth, Oba Ohen killed him. Because an Oba must be truthful with his subjects, the Edo people then executed Oba Ohen.

Since then, every Oba is believed to have inherited the awesome, supernatural power of Oba Ohen’s legs, but an Oba must control this force with great care.

This narrative explains why any Oba can be pictured as the fish-legged Ohen and why his feet must not touch the earth when it is wet.

Ozolua the Conqueror and the Betrayal of Elaisolobi (row 6)

Oba Ozolua was a mighty warrior. In the late fifteenth century, he made the Kingdom of Benin grow and grow. For many years, Ozolua conquered one town, then another. To keep his army strong, he demanded more and more young men and more and more food and clothes from Benin City. Many of his people began to complain, and his soldiers also began to grumble. Even his best friend Elaisolobi (ee-lie-so-low-bee) begged him to stop fighting. They all said that the kingdom was big enough and that it was time to go home. But Ozolua would not listen. He always had to fight just one more town.

Although Elaisolobi was Oba Ozolua’s best friend, he also loved the Kingdom of Benin. He decided that he must do something. Elaisolobi knew a secret about Oba Ozolua. Oba Ozolua never took off his iron armor, except when he took a bath. Elaisolobi told the enemy where to find Oba Ozolua bathing. The great conqueror was killed, the fighting stopped, and the kingdom was saved.
How Was the Tusk Originally Displayed?

The elephant tusk is one of a number of symbolic items that comprise a royal ancestral altar in the Kingdom of Benin. When an Oba dies, his son inherits the throne. The new Oba then must establish an altar commemorating his father, the previous Oba. Such altars are tributes as well to other earlier Obas, and the altars create a way to contact the spirits of these leaders, should their support or advice be needed. Palace ceremonies reinforcing the continuity of divine kingship also take place in front of these altars.

Mud is carefully used to form the semicircular altar platform, which then dries and becomes hard. Upon this platform are placed pairs of brass heads, each supporting a carved ivory tusk. These heads represent the helper of a person’s guardian spirit, which resides within his head during the day but at night lives in the world of the dead. Placed between the brass heads supporting the elephant tusks is a cast brass sculpture depicting the Oba with attendants, as well as other freestanding brass figures and pyramidal brass bells. At the back of the altar, leaning against the wall, are staffs with built-in rattles, used to call the ancestral spirits.

Several rituals are conducted in front of the royal altars, the most important of which is the Ugie Erha Oba (oo-g-ee air-hah oh-bah). Ugie Erha Oba honors the Oba’s paternal ancestors and symbolizes the Oba’s supremacy in the hierarchy of the court. On the first day of this ceremony, the Oba conducts rites in the palace compound, which honor all past Obas. On the second day, individual chiefs, according to their rank, present the Oba with gifts of kola nuts and palm wine. On the third day, the Oba dresses in an elaborate costume of coral beads and appears in public. He makes sacrifices at the altar of his father to commemorate his father’s deeds and to appease dangerous forces. The chiefs demonstrate their reverence and allegiance to the Oba by dancing around him, with ceremonial swords raised, to the music of horn and drums. The Oba then performs a similar dance before his father’s altar. The ceremony concludes with a mock battle, in which chiefs reenact an early sixteenth-century challenge to the Oba’s power by a former council of chiefs.
How Are Tusks Made?

The artists commissioned to carve this tusk were experienced ivory carvers. Because of the preciousness of ivory, the complexity of the designs, and the important role of a tusk on an ancestor altar, carvers have to be members of a hereditary guild that inherits techniques, symbols, and patterns from previous generations. Oba Ewuare, the mid-fifteenth-century Oba who is featured several times on this tusk, is credited with developing many of the visual symbols of divine kingship that have endured. Ivory carvers are also frequently wood carvers, and they may use the same adzcs and knives for cutting and rough-textured leaves or other abrasive materials for sanding and smoothing.

Why Is Elephant Ivory Used?

Ivory, like cast brass, is a material used by the Edo to affirm the power of the Oba. Especially in the eighteenth century, ivory was highly valued because of its costliness, rarity, popularity as an item of trade, color, durability, and animal origin. Specifically, ivory connotes the strength, endurance, power, longevity, and wisdom of elephants. Hence, the use of ivory is critical to the tusk’s role as an enduring symbol of the Kingdom of Benin.

The white color of ivory is one of its most significant attributes: like chalk, ivory’s whiteness symbolizes the purity associated with Olokun, god of the sea, who is seen as a source of extraordinary wealth and fertility. Altar tusks are washed and bleached with citrus juice to remove the remains of sacrifices poured over them and to keep them as white as possible.

Before the twentieth century, one tusk from every elephant slain in the Kingdom of Benin had to be given to the Oba, and the other had to be offered to him for sale. The Edo also obtained raw, uncarved tusks from the Yoruba kingdoms to the north and west, where elephants were plentiful.

- Original research on the Royal Altar Tusk by Barbara Blackman, Ph.D.
Glossary

Adze: An axe-like tool used for carving wood, which features an arched blade placed at a right angle to the handle.

Altar: A structure or platform upon which sacred religious objects are gathered. In the Kingdom of Benin, a royal altar is a semicircular platform upon which ivory tusks, rattles, and bells are displayed and safeguarded in between religious ceremonies.

Edo: The people of the Kingdom of Benin.

Guild: A society of artisans who train and work together, and who establish professional standards.

Mudfish: A fish that lives on land and in water. A mudfish can symbolize both prosperity and danger, since some varieties of mudfish can be eaten, while others give off dangerous electric shocks. When shaped like a mudfish, an Oba’s legs represent the paralyzed legs of Oba Ohen, which were thought to have supernatural powers.

Oba: The semi-divine ruler of the Kingdom of Benin, considered a descendant of the gods.

Olokun: The god of the sea and son of the High God according to Edo beliefs.

Sacrifices: Animals and other objects offered on ceremonial occasions to honor the gods, spirits, and ancestors, and to commemorate the Oba’s father.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*Royal Altar Tusk*

Three stories found on the tusk represent Oba Ewuare the Great, an important Oba of the people of Benin.

Read these stories out loud and ask the following questions.

**Oba Ewuare: The Leopard and the Viper, (p.70)**

What was dripping on Oba Ewuare’s face?
What did Oba Ewuare discover he had been sleeping on?
What two symbols represent Oba Ewuare?

**Oba Ewuare and Olokun, God of the Sea, (p.70)**

Where does Olokun live?
What does his palace look like?
What were some of the treasures Oba Ewuare took home?

**Oba Ewuare and his Coral Crown, (p.71)**

Describe what Oba Ewuare wore on his head.
What did Oba Ewuare need from every man, woman, and child in the kingdom?
Can you chant one of the daily greetings Oba Ewuare invented?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Benin carvers work the figures on the tusk in *relief*; each figure stands out from the background because the area around it has been carved away. Figures and symbols on the tusk tell the story of the Oba’s family, the Kingdom of Benin, and the Edo people.

**ART ACTIVITY: Relief Sculpture**

Choose one figure, animal, or abstract symbol on the tusk and carve your own version in plaster.
* Cut the bottom of a milk carton.

* Mix and pour plaster into the carton. Discard the carton when the plaster is dry.

* Draw an image on the plaster with a pencil.

* Carve into the plaster using a spoon.

NOTE: First carve away an even 1/4" layer of the background surrounding the figure. Then carve details into the raised figure such as lines or patterns.

**WRITING ACTIVITY: Leaders**

Write a story highlighting an important achievement of a family member, community figure, or national hero.

**COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY: Genealogy**

Create a timeline of the history of your family as the tusk is a way of recording the passage of time.

* Research three or four generations of your family. Find out names, birth and death dates, places lived, etc.

* Bring in at least one photograph from each generation researched.

* Write down a story about each person or place featured in the photograph.

* Create a timeline of the family from the facts, stories and pictures.

* Display the timelines.
Student Bibliography (Grades 2–8)

Stories from Benin and Nigeria


Art and Culture of Africa


**Teacher Bibliography**

African Art


**African Ivory Tusks**


**History and Display of Collections**


**Teacher Materials on African Art**


**See Also**


Royal Altar Tusk, Kingdom of Benin, Africa

The Pouncing Leopard

Every Oba is praised as Ekpen’Oowa (ehk-payn’oh-oh-wa), "Leopard of the World," and as Ekpeolo (ehk-pay-low-lah), "Pouncing Leopard who never misses his prey." Because leopards are so powerful, images of leopard faces sometimes appear near the Oba's head or at his waist.

Row 9

Emuru

An Emuru (ee-moo-roo) is a ceremonial official in charge of one of the magical brass containers called iru (ee-roo) that Oba Ewuare brought back from the underwater palace of Olokun, god of the sea.

Row 8

Magical Brass Iru

According to folklore, these shining brass vessels speak, and thus, keep dangerous forces away during the ceremonies honoring an Oba's father.

Row 8

Royal Woman

A royal woman honors the contributions women make to the human and spiritual worlds through their insights and labor.

Row 7

Crocodiles

Crocodiles are the policemen of Olokun, god of the sea, as they can overturn the canoes of those who try to disrupt trade. Crocodiles patrol the seaports and rivers leading to the capital city of the Kingdom of Benin.

Row 7

Oton

Members of the Oton (oh-ton) society carry two long wands to drive away spirits that might be disruptive when an animal or human travels to the spiritual world.

Row 9

Uwenriarun Wand

Both the executioner priest and a member of the Oton society carry the uwenriarun (oo-wen-ree-on-uhn), a thin, straight wand used to keep dangerous forces away and to signal that an important ceremony is underway.

Row 8

Portuguese Trader

Oba Ewuare, Oba Ozolua, and Oba Esigie all traded with the Portuguese.

Row 8

Portuguese Soldier

Oba Ozolua fought many wars, often with the help of Portuguese soldiers.

Row 7

Oba Ewuare with Oba Ohen's Legs

Oba Ohen (oh-hen), the father of Ewuare, was an Oba whose legs became paralyzed when they were filled with supernatural power. Ohen abused his royal authority and was therefore killed by the Edo people. Every Oba inherits Ohen's supernatural power. Ohen's mudfish legs warn the Edo people that the Oba has great power, and remind the Oba that he must not abuse that power.

Row 7

Executioner Priest

Criminals were executed by a priest with a sword during ceremonies honoring the Oba's ancestors. The tall helmet of this executioner priest indicates that he has inherited his office.
Warrior
This Edo warrior carries a shield and a spear.

The Oba's Trunk-Hand
An elephant's head with the trunk ending in a human fist is a symbol of the Oba's ancestors. This fist with the power of the elephant represents the great strength of the Kingdom of Benin.

Queen Mother
All Edo Queen Mothers strive to be like Oba Esigie's mother Idia, who was the first Edo woman honored with the title of Onibah (ee-oh-bah), Queen Mother. Idia won this honor because she used magical skills, diplomacy, and military strategy to help her son rule the kingdom.

Ekpate
The Ekpate (ek-pah-tay) are female spiritual guardians who accompany the Oba during public appearances. When Ekpate sense hostile forces, they deflect danger with mirrors hidden inside the rectangular cases that they hold.

Oba Ozolua
Oba Ozolua (ah-zah-foo-ah) the Conqueror was one of Ewuare's sons. Ozolua fought many wars. Here he wears a suit of armor under coral beads.

Elaisolobi
Elaisolobi (ee-lee-so-low-bee) was the best friend and closest advisor of Oba Ozolua. They fought many battles together until the Edo people began to complain about the constant fighting. To save the kingdom from splitting apart, Elaisolobi betrayed Ozolua to his enemies.

Oba Ewuare with Oba Ohen's Legs
Oba Ohen (oh-hen), the father of Ewuare, was an Oba whose legs became paralyzed when they were filled with supernatural power. Oden abused his royal authority and was therefore killed by the Edo people. Every Oba inherits Ohen's supernatural power. Oden's mudfish legs warn the Edo people that the Oba has great power, and remind the Oba that he must not abuse that power.

A Magic Belt
This magic belt ends in two pythons, servants of the Oba on land and of Olokun under water. Each python seizes a frog. Like the python and the mudfish, a frog can live either on land or in water.

Oba Ewuare
According to folklore, Oba Ewuare the Great ruled the Edo people from about 1450 to 1481. Ewuare went to the seacoast and brought back to his palace shiny brass containers and red coral beads acquired from Portuguese traders. Edo stories say that Ewuare got these from Olokun, god of the sea.

Ancestral Oba
Queen Mother
All Edo Queen Mothers strive to be like Oba Esigie's mother Idia, who was the first Edo woman honored with the title of iy'Oba (ee-oh-ba). Queen Mother. Idia won this honor because she used magical skills, diplomacy, and military strategy to help her son rule the kingdom.

Enobore
Two officials called enobore (en-oh-bore-ay) always stand on each side of the Oba to support him as he walks. The Edo say that problems such as corruption and poverty will follow if the people do not support the Oba's leadership.

Priest of Ogun
Ogun is the god of iron, brass, weapons, machinery, and war. Ogun's tongs for forging metal are on the left.

Oba Ewuare
According to folklore, Oba Ewuare (ch-war-ay) the Great ruled the Edo people from about 1450 to 1481. Ewuare went to the seacoast and brought back to his palace shining brass containers and red coral beads acquired from Portuguese traders. Edo stories say that Ewuare got these from Olokun, god of the sea.

Portuguese Trader
These two long-haired, bearded figures are Portuguese traders. Their hands are holding cloth or beads.

Official Appointed by Oba Esigie
This palace official served Oba Esigie (ch-see-gee-ay).

Ancestral Oba
This Oba wears a tall helmet crown with strands of rare coral, part of the lavish costume Oba Ewuare won from the sea god Olokun. On the Oba's chest is the huge, red agate bend of kingship that gives him authority over the Edo people. Around the Oba's waist are ivory or brass amulets to protect him and at his sides are images of mudfish.

Man with Viper
The Edo say that Oba Ewuare had the "good luck of the viper" because he made his kingdom very wealthy. The viper, a poisonous snake, also represents danger. Here it overcomes the small man to the right of Oba Ewuare, suggesting that like the viper the Oba will strike quickly to punish enemies of the kingdom.

Priest of the Royal Ancestors
Priests keep good relations with the gods and ancestors to ensure a strong and prosperous kingdom.

Mudfish
The Edo (ch-doh) people believe that mudfish serve the Oba, ruler of the land, as well as Olokun (ch-law-kun), god of the sea. Some mudfish are good to eat, while others give off dangerous electric shocks. Thus an image of a mudfish can suggest both the Oba's wealth and his dangerous powers.
Rip Van Winkle, 1829
attributed to John Quidor
(American, 1800–1881)
Oil on canvas
George F. Harding
Collection, 1982.765
Rip Van Winkle

attributed to
John Quidor

Overview

John Quidor was born in 1800 in Tappan, New York, a town in the Hudson River Valley. His father was a schoolteacher. When Quidor was eleven, his family moved to New York City. At the age of fourteen, he studied with the well-known portrait painter John Wesley Jarvis. To earn extra money, Quidor painted banners and signs for New York City's volunteer fire department.

In 1829 Quidor began exhibiting his paintings at the National Academy of Design in New York City. Since artists had a hard time earning a living in the 1830s, Quidor left New York City to try farming in Quincy and Columbus, Illinois. After about twelve years, he moved to upstate New York, where he painted full-time until his death in 1881.

Quidor lived when the United States was a young country. He and other American writers and artists began to look to their own land and its people for subjects to write about or paint. Quidor enjoyed reading books by James Fenimore Cooper (also a resident of upstate New York), and Washington Irving. The artist often chose romantic and fantastic scenes from their stories to paint, such as this and other events from Irving's 1820 tale "Rip Van Winkle."
What’s the Story?

Washington Irving’s character, Rip Van Winkle, is a hunter and trapper of Dutch descent living in a small town in the Hudson River Valley of New York State in the 1760s. In order to escape the continuous nagging of his wife, Rip frequently walks through the Catskill Mountains with his faithful dog Wolf. On one such trip, Rip is lured into a secluded glen by a strange and very small man dressed “in the antique Dutch fashion.” Rip decides to join the man’s companions in their game of skittles or ninepins, a bowling game in which a wooden disk or ball is used to knock down nine pins. While they play, Rip drinks a mysterious potion that tastes somewhat like Dutch beer. At the end of the game, Rip falls asleep and does not awaken for twenty years. When he returns home, no one recognizes him, his wife and all of his friends are dead, and George Washington, rather than King George III, presides over the country. After confronting skeptical townspeople, Rip is recognized by his daughter Judith, who takes him into her home to live the rest of his life in comfort.
First published in 1820 in Washington Irving’s short-story collection *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*, “Rip Van Winkle” has become a classic of early American literature. The young United States was eager to have its own legends and myths featuring the everyday lives of its citizens. This story is based on a German folktale about a young goat shepherd named Peter Klaus, who was lured into a dell where twelve knights played skittles and where Klaus drank and fell asleep for twenty years. The small, secluded wooded valleys of the Catskills were a natural setting for an American version of the story.

This painting of Rip Van Winkle highlights Rip’s emotions upon his return to his post-Revolutionary War hometown. Fantasy, nostalgia, and political commentary play equal roles in this interpretation of Irving’s story.
Ghosts and Relics

At the end of Irving's story, the mystery of Rip's long nap is ascribed to the ghostly appearance of Henry Hudson, the first European to explore the Hudson River and its immediate region. A town member explains that Hudson keeps a ghostly vigil over the area by appearing every twenty years with his crew and that they are seen on such occasions playing ninepins (skittles). Since Hudson explored the Hudson River in 1609 and thereafter appeared every twenty years, Rip would have fallen asleep in 1769 and awakened in 1789, the year George Washington (for whom Irving was named) was elected president. The portrait of George Washington that swings over the tavern's door in the Quidor painting highlights the young republic's pride in its heroic leader.

Quidor also included details that reflected New York politics of the early nineteenth century. The Dutch colonial settlement of New Amsterdam, which would become New York City, was founded in 1626 and was ruled for thirty-eight years by the Dutch before it was turned over to England in 1664. When Washington Irving was born in New York City in 1783, its twenty thousand inhabitants were still largely Dutch and many still spoke the Dutch language and practiced Dutch customs. By the time Quidor was born in 1800, both the culture and architecture of New York City were experiencing rapid change, although change came more slowly to the Dutch communities that filled the Hudson River Valley, the setting for Irving's story and Quidor's painting.

The early years of Irving's and Quidor's lives in New York City saw the end of traditional Dutch culture, as the city's oldest inhabitants became part of a larger, more diverse urban society. Changes made to the city's Dutch houses were the most visible symbol of this transformation. Characterized by step-shaped roofs, many of these seventeenth- and eighteenth-century houses were still standing when the Revolutionary War began in 1775. However, by 1820 most had been destroyed and replaced with buildings constructed in English Georgian and Neoclassical architectural styles. It is no accident that the houses in "Rip Van Winkle," set shortly after the American Revolution, still have the step-shaped roofs of the earlier Dutch buildings.
The newspaper *New-York Mirror* and other periodicals started a campaign in the late 1820s to save remaining buildings, featuring engravings of the endangered architecture and nostalgic stories about "Knickerbocker" (Dutch) taste in order to build public support. Although the cause achieved great notoriety, the last Dutch house in New York City was destroyed in 1834. During the 1930s, the Dutch house became a cultural icon with a wide range of associations surrounding the destruction of New York's early history. Hence, the Dutch houses included in this painting suggest a wider context in which to understand Rip Van Winkle as a figure battling against forces of change beyond his control.

**What’s in the Painting?**

This painting illustrates the most dramatic moment of Irving's story, when Rip awakens from his sleep and returns to his village, on what was an election day of the new Republic.

*The appearance of Rip, with his long grizzled beard, his rusty fowling piece, his uncouth dress, and an army of women and children at his heels, soon attracted the attention of the tavern politicians. They crowded round him, eyeing him from head to foot with great curiosity. The orator bustled up to him, and, drawing him partly aside, inquired "On which side he voted?" Rip stared in vacant stupidity. Another short but busy little fellow pulled him by the arm, and, rising on tiptoe, inquired in his ear, "Whether he was Federal or Democrat?" Rip was equally at a loss to comprehend the question; when a knowing, self-important old gentleman, in a sharp cocked hat, made his way through the crowd, putting them to the right and left with his elbows as he passed, and planting himself before Van Winkle, with one arm akimbo, the other resting on his cane, his keen eyes and sharp hat penetrating, as it were, into his very soul, demanded in an austere tone, "what brought him to the election with a gun on his shoulder, and a mob at his heels, and whether he meant to breed a riot in the village?"—"Alas! gentlemen," cried Rip, somewhat dismayed, "I am a poor quiet man, a native of the place, and a loyal subject of the King, God bless him!"*
Here a general shout burst from the bystanders—"A Tory! a Tory! a spy! a refugee! hustle him away with him!" It was with great difficulty that the self-important man in the cocked hat restored order; and, having assumed a tenfold austerity of brow, demanded again of the unknown culprit, what he came there for, and whom he was seeking? The poor man humbly assured them that he meant no harm, but merely came there in search of some of his neighbors, who used to keep about the tavern. . . .

Rip's heart died away at hearing of these sad changes in his home and friends, and finding himself thus alone in the world. Every answer puzzled him too, by treating of such enormous lapses of time, and of matters which he could not understand: war—Congress—Stoney Point—he had no courage to ask after any more friends, but cried out in despair; "Does nobody here know Rip Van Winkle?"

"Oh, Rip Van Winkle!" exclaimed two or three, "Oh, to be sure! that's Rip Van Winkle yonder, leaning against the tree." Rip looked, and beheld a precise counterpart of himself, as he went up the mountain: apparently as lazy, and certainly as ragged. The poor fellow was now completely confounded. He doubted his own identity, and whether he was himself or another man. In the midst of his bewilderment, the man in the cocked hat demanded who he was, and what was his name?

"God knows," exclaimed he, at his wit's end, "I'm not myself—I'm somebody else—that's me yonder—no—that's somebody else got into my shoes—I was myself last night, but I fell asleep on the mountain, and they've changed my gun, and every thing's changed, and I'm changed, and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am!"

As the above passage from Irving's story indicates, the crowd in the painting appears highly suspicious of Rip's outburst. An old woman leaning on a crutch, a pack of thin children, a young mother holding close her frightened child, and various other skeptical farmers and townspeople make up the crowd. In this scene, Rip seems trapped between the hostile people before him and the red-vested man who demands to know his identity.
John Quidor (1800–1881)

John Quidor was born in Tappan, New York, a town in the Hudson River Valley. He was the son of a schoolteacher, and the family moved to New York City when Quidor was eleven. When he was fourteen, Quidor was apprenticed to the portrait painter John Wesley Jarvis. It is possible that Quidor was also apprenticed at some time to a sign painter or other commercial artist, as he supplemented his income by painting banners and signboards for New York City's volunteer fire department. He also taught a number of aspiring artists. Four of Quidor's oil paintings were exhibited in 1829 at the National Academy of Design in New York City, an association that organized yearly exhibitions to showcase the talents of American artists and one that remains active today as a venue for historical exhibitions.

According to an anonymous reviewer of an 1829 show at the National Academy of Design, Quidor's painting, if exhibited in Europe, "would be bought at a handsome price, and the painter be thus encouraged and enabled to produce one still better. How it will be in America, one cannot say." The painting to which this quotation refers is thought to be the Art Institute's Rip Van Winkle.

Despite this promising reception, Quidor left the New York art world by 1837. He moved to Illinois and farmed for twelve years in Quincy and Columbus before returning to New York State. The artist painted for almost fifty years, creating landscapes, religious subjects, and portraits in addition to subjects drawn from literature. He based many of these paintings on the work of Washington Irving (1783–1859) and James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851). Their works — especially "Rip Van Winkle" and Cooper's The Pioneers — were among the most influential early writings on the geographical wonders of the Catskill Mountain area of upstate New York, which Quidor loved. Although Quidor's paintings were not intended to be book illustrations, it is thought that twenty-one of his twenty-eight surviving paintings are based on Irving's stories.
Washington Irving (1783–1859)

Washington Irving was the youngest child of a wealthy New York merchant who sided with the colonists in the Revolutionary War. The young Irving was trained as a lawyer before turning to journalism and literature. He had already achieved some fame as a writer when, in 1809, he published a comic history titled *Diedrich Knickerbocker’s History of New York from the Beginning of the World to the End of the Dutch Dynasty*, which earned Irving international attention. “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” were two of the classic stories included in Irving’s most successful book, *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon of 1819*, which the author described as “found among the papers of the late Diedrich Knickerbocker.” In reality, the book was written while Irving was living in England. In addition to popular fiction, Irving also produced essays, biographies, and historical works.

**Rip Van Winkle and the Arts**
Throughout the nineteenth century, several versions of “Rip Van Winkle” were performed on the American stage. One of America’s leading actors, Joseph Jefferson (1829–1905), wrote and acted in the most successful of these productions, and he devoted much of his stage career to the exploration of this character.
Glossary

Apprentice: One who enters a legal agreement to work for another for a specific amount of time in return for instruction in a trade, art, or business. Learning to paint as an apprentice was a centuries-old custom in Europe and was also practiced in the young United States.

"Knickerbocker": The colloquial term for things of Dutch culture, such as houses with step-shaped roofs.

Skittles or ninepins: A bowling game in which a wooden disk or ball is used to knock down nine pins.

Federal: The term refers to the Federalist Party (1789-1801), which advocated strong central government and support of the United States Constitution.

Democrat: The term refers to the Democratic Party, which had its origins among Thomas Jefferson’s Republicans, who were strongly against the monarchy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*Rip Van Winkle* attributed to John Quidor

Read the passage from *Rip Van Winkle* (p. 90) on which this painting is based. Have students pick out the details from the passage represented in this painting.

- Rip with long grizzled beard and rusty fowling piece (musket)
- an army of women and children gathered at his heels
- an old gentleman in a sharp cocked hat
- Rip Van Winkle’s son leaning against a tree

Find Rip Van Winkle.
How can you tell he has been asleep for twenty years?

Imagine you fell asleep and woke up in twenty years. How might things be different?
CLASSEEEACTIVITIES

Both Washington Irving and John Quidor were interested in transformations that happen over time. “Rip Van Winkle” was so popular that scenes from the story were painted by many artists and a number of theatrical versions of the story were performed to great acclaim in the nineteenth century.

ART ACTIVITY: Before and After

Read “Rip Van Winkle” by Washington Irving and illustrate another scene from the story.
OR, read another story by Washington Irving and illustrate a scene from it.

WRITING ACTIVITY:
What Will Life Be Like?

Imagine falling asleep for twenty years and waking up to a very different life. Write a story or a play about how things have changed. Describe how the environment, technology, fashion, politics, and your family and friends are different.

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY:
The Drama of the Story

Produce a play using one of the scripts or stories written by the students. Different students can be responsible for different aspects of the production.

• Create the set. Choose students to draw or paint scenery on large pieces of paper.

• Make costumes for the actors. Choose students to make costume elements such as Rip’s tattered clothes.

• Choose actors for the play.
Student Bibliography (Grades 2–8)

Versions of Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle”


American Art

Teacher Bibliography


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_____.


_____.

Train Station, 1936
Walter Ellison
(American, 1900–1977)
Oil on canvas
Charles M. Kurtz Charitable Trust and Barbara Neff Smith and Solomon Byron Smith funds; through prior gifts of Florence Jane Adams, Mr. and Mrs. Carter H. Harrison, and Estate of Celia Schmidt, 1990.154.
Train Station

Walter Ellison

Overview

Walter Ellison was born in Eatonton, Georgia, in 1900. As a teenager, he left his rural southern home for Chicago. His move was part of the Great Migration, which took place between 1910 and 1970. During those years, six million African Americans left their homes in the South to start new lives in cities up North. Ellison studied at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago and exhibited his paintings in the American Negro Exposition, held in Chicago in 1940, and at the city’s South Side Community Art Center. He painted scenes from his own life that tell both his story and the story of other African Americans living during the early decades of this century.

This painting shows a train station in Ellison’s native Georgia. White passengers board southbound trains for vacations, while black passengers board northbound trains for work in industrial cities. Ellison painted this scene in 1936, during the “Jim Crow” period in southern history. “Jim Crow” laws required public spaces such as railway stations to provide one waiting room for blacks and another for whites. Trains also had separate cars for the two races, and on streetcars and buses whites sat in the front and blacks in the rear. Facilities were separate but rarely were equal.

Chicago was an appealing destination for blacks moving North. It had an established African American community dating back to before the Civil War. Although discrimination existed in Chicago, the city offered better schools, voting rights, leisure activities, and the chance to live day to day with more freedom than Southern towns did. The Chicago Defender was the most widely circulated black newspaper in the South (and continues to be an influential newspaper). Black southerners interested in moving North sent letters to the newspaper and got the information they needed to find jobs. The Defender portrayed the North as a place of freedom and opportunity.
What's the Story?

Train Station shows black people headed north for work in Chicago, Detroit, and New York. White people are headed south for vacation in Miami, West Palm Beach, and Tallahassee, Florida. Porters wearing orange suits help the travelers by carrying luggage and giving directions. One man carries a suitcase with the artist's initials, W. W. E. The people traveling north are part of the Great Migration during which thousands of rural southerners moved to cities in the North for jobs.

The artist Walter Ellison was part of the Great Migration. This train station might be the one in Macon, Georgia, a town located near his home in Eatonton. Ellison came to Chicago from Georgia when he was a teenager. Though the images in the painting may come from his own life, they also reflect the experiences of many who migrated in search of a better life. Their stories — told in print and music as well as in art — are part of this painting.
The Great Migration

From 1910 to 1970, six million southern-born African Americans were enticed or forced to leave southern farms to work in northern industrial cities. The American labor pool changed dramatically in 1914 with the beginning of World War I (1914-1918). The war not only slowed European immigration, it caused thousands of recent immigrants to the United States to return to their home countries to fight. Factories in the North were left with a dangerously low supply of workers just as wartime industries began to boom. Manufacturers sent recruiters to the South to offer blacks free transportation, the promise of a well-paying job, and greater freedom.

Fearing the loss of cheap labor, southern white farmers attempted, but failed, to slow northern recruitment. The African American community in Chicago, the largest industrial center in the nation, grew at a very rapid rate. The city was known to many southerners through The Chicago Defender, a newspaper that not only provided information about the North and Chicago, but also denounced lynching and other forms of racial oppression in the South, and portrayed the North as a place of greater freedom and opportunity. By 1918, Chicago had attracted 60,000 southern blacks, the largest number in the nation; by 1920, Chicago's black population numbered about 109,000. It was mostly concentrated in the area of the city on the near South Side, known as Douglas/Grand Boulevard, the Black Metropolis, and/or Bronzeville. After World War I, blacks continued to be recruited as industrialists attempted to replace striking white workers. After World War II (1939-1945), mechanized cotton pickers appeared on southern farms, forcing many blacks who had stayed in the rural South to find jobs elsewhere. In Chicago, the black population more than doubled between 1950 and 1970, from 492,000 to over a million.
Families on the Move

Moving from the South to the North was difficult for many southern African American families. Buying a train ticket to the North was very expensive, and many people had to sell their belongings, houses, land, and even clothes to do so. Other families pooled their money to buy a ticket for one family member, hoping that the person would make enough money to send for the rest of the family. Men often left their families temporarily to find jobs and housing in the North, leaving the women behind to support the family until they could afford to move.

Families arriving in Chicago usually ended their journey at the Illinois Central Railway station (demolished) at 12th Street and Michigan Avenue. Many families moved into South Side “kitchenette” apartments, which typically comprised several small rooms equipped with a hot plate, an icebox, and a shared bathroom down the hall. Even the most basic factory or service job paid an average of four times the amount a worker could earn picking cotton, and northern black children could go to school instead of working, which was often not the case in the South. But as the South Side population grew, housing became scarce, forcing people to live in overcrowded tenement houses. Poor housing conditions soon instigated health problems such as tuberculosis. Race riots also occurred, as discrimination was still widespread in the North. “Fair and equal treatment” promises made by whites frequently were not kept.

Trains and the Great Migration

The train station here is possibly that of Macon, Georgia, the same station that appears in Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple*. Ellison may have painted this scene based on events of the 1930s or on his memories of coming North as a teenager. Black porters in orange suits serve both the southbound and northbound travelers, carrying the luggage of whites and pointing a confused traveler to a northbound train. Being a Pullman porter for the railroads was considered a good job at this time, and African American porters often helped
immigrants by providing them with news, information, and support on their journeys to the North.

Vernon Jarrett, a retired columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times* who migrated to Chicago from Paris, Tennessee, after World War II, described the train as a vehicle of opportunity. “You couldn’t do without the train spiritually. It was the vehicle that could take you to heaven before you died. Heaven meaning away from here.” But another black characterized the journey as bittersweet, remembering that trains also carried passengers away from childhood homes, churches, and family and friends, to uncertain futures. He also recalled that southern train stations were places where African Americans could be harassed or arrested to force them to stay and provide cheap labor in the South.

**Walter Ellison (1900–1977)**

Walter Ellison (1900–1977) was born in Eatonton, Georgia. He came to Chicago as an adolescent during the Great Migration. After studying at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, he exhibited in Chicago at the 1940 American Negro Exposition at the Tanner Gallery, the first exhibition to feature African American artists, and in the 1940s he was active in the South Side Community Art Center.

**Chicago and African American Artists**

African American artists in Chicago came to form a community not only through the forces of the Great Migration, but also through their own determination to take advantage of the Works Progress (later called *Projects*) Administration Federal Art Project (WPA/FAP). The WPA/FAP was created on October 14, 1935 to support artists, after the 1929 Stock Market Crash led to the unemployment of 25% of working adults during the period called the Great Depression. The largest and most well-known of a number of government projects designed to assist artists, the WPA/FAP at its height employed 5,000
people. Under this program, artists created 108,000 paintings, 18,000 sculptures, 2,500 murals, and thousands of prints, posters, and photographs. The WPA/FAP also helped to create community art centers throughout the country, including the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago.

Chicago artists also took advantage of the example set by the African American arts community that developed in New York City during the 1920s and 1930s. Called the “Harlem Renaissance” and begun as a literary movement, this cultural explosion reshaped black identity in the early twentieth century. With the 1925 publication of The New Negro, edited by Dr. Alain Locke, the black artist as well as the black writer became a force in the evolution of black culture in the United States. New York artists such as Charles Alston, Aaron Douglas, Vertis Hayes, and Augusta Savage took the initiative to open their studios to students. In 1921, the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library began hosting regular exhibitions sponsored by the Harlem Art Workshop. By 1935, Harlem artists joined to form the Harlem Artists’ Guild for the purpose of establishing an independent art center under the WPA/FAP. By 1938, when the Harlem Community Art Center had been open for only a year, 3,000 students were enrolled. The center became a model for other community projects sponsored by the WPA/FAP, such as Chicago’s South Side Community Art Center.

Chicago’s vibrant art community similarly established its own center in the 1950s. In order to raise money, artists gave benefit theater performances and organized an annual gala dance called the “Artists and Models Ball,” for which they designed elaborate costumes and awarded prizes for the best creations. These balls raised enough money for the downpayment on a brownstone at 3831 South Michigan Avenue. This brownstone was once owned by the Comiskey family — the family that owned and managed the White Sox from 1900 to the late 1950s — and was located in what, in the nineteenth century, had been the Gold Coast of Chicago. The mansion became the South Side Community Art Center on May 7, 1941, in a ceremony led by Dr. Alain Locke and Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the president of the United States. In addition to Ellison,
Margaret Burroughs, Eldzier Cortor, Charles White, and Archibald Motley (each of whose work is also in the Art Institute’s collections) were also active in the early years of the center. With World War II came the termination of the WPA and the community of African American artists of the 1950s. The South Side Community Art Center, however, continues to this day to provide professional training and opportunities for young artists to work together.

Many of the artists who founded the South Side Community Art Center became professionals through their studies at The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. Ellison, Burroughs, Elizabeth Catlett, Cortor, and White all studied at the School. Between 1936 and 1948, the School was also one of the institutions where African American students from Kentucky studied under the financing of the Anderson-Myer State Aid Act, which provided funds for out-of-state graduates and professional training for African Americans.

Chicago was also the home of one of the most important exhibitions of work by black artists in America to date. Held in 1940 at the Tanner Gallery in Chicago, the “American Negro Exposition,” also called “The Art of the American Negro,” featured the art of many African American artists active at that time. The exhibition was the basis for the first American monograph on African American art, Alain Locke’s The Negro in Art, published later in 1940. Ellison’s monotype The Sunny South, now owned by the Art Institute, was published in the book, bringing Ellison the most attention that he would know as an artist.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*Train Station* by Walter Ellison

Ask the students to tell where their families came from: another city, state, or country?

Look carefully at the slide of the painting. Which trains are going north and which trains are going south?

List as many words as you can find in the painting. When the words are found, answer these questions:

*SOUTH-BOUND*: White people are on their way south for vacation. How are they dressed?

*Miami*: This city is in the south. Why was Miami a popular vacation spot?

*Trains North*: Black people are traveling north to find freedom and well-paying jobs. How do you think they feel about their journey?

*Chicago*: What kinds of jobs do you think blacks found in this northern city?

*Detroit*: What kinds of jobs do you think blacks found in this northern city?

*Exit*: Where do you think this door leads?

*Colored*: When this painting was made, public places in the south were required by law to provide separate facilities, such as restrooms, for blacks and whites. What do you think about these laws?

*W.W.E.*: Whose initials are these? Why did the artist include the initials on the suitcase?

*Walter W. Ellison*: This is the artist’s signature.
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Walter Ellison's painting includes people traveling to many different places. Each of the people in his painting has a story to tell about the past and the future. Many people have stories about when journeys changed the lives of their family members.

ART ACTIVITY: Drawing a Journey

Draw a picture that represents a journey you have taken.

- Draw a line down the middle of the paper.
- On one half of the paper draw a picture of the starting point of your journey.
- On the other half of the paper draw a picture of your destination.

WRITING ACTIVITY: The Story in the Painting

Write the story you think Walter Ellison is trying to tell or tell your own story about this painting.

- Choose a character in the picture. Give the character a name.
- Describe the starting point of the character's journey and final destination.
- OR, pretend you are a character in the painting. Write a letter to someone to ask for help with your journey and your final destination.

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY:
A World of Families

Using a map of the world, have students locate where their family or ancestors came from. Using colored yarn and push pins, have them trace the path that their family traveled to get to Chicago.
Student Bibliography (Grades 2-8)


Teacher Bibliography


Chapter 6

Heirs Come to Pass, 3, 1991
Martina Lopez, (American, born 1962)
Silver-dye bleach print made from a digitally assisted montage
Promised gift of David C. and Sarajeann Ruttenberg, courtesy of the Ruttenberg Arts Foundation
Heirs Come to Pass, 3 and Revolutions in Time, 1

Martina Lopez

Overview

One of eight children, Martina Lopez was born in Seattle, Washington. As a second generation Mexican American, she was raised with both American customs and traditional Hispanic family values. "I have a strong connection to family. I also see people as surprisingly similar. I believe that we as individuals share similar dreams, fears, and experiences."

In 1986, while studying photography at the University of Washington, Lopez began making computer images. She moved to Chicago in 1987 to attend The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. The artist uses old photographs she finds in thrift stores and pictures from family albums as a visual diary. "I began to use the computer to create images from beyond my personal album as a way to create a collective history, one that would allow people to bring their own memories to my work."

Lopez has an idea of what she wants to achieve before working at the computer. On the computer screen she creates images from photographs she has taken of clouds and landscapes. She then adds figures from old snapshots, often changing their color and size. After finishing her composition, Lopez has a four-by-five transparency made from the computer disk. A photo lab then produces a large-scale photographic print in color from the transparency.
What’s the Story?

Martina Lopez makes photographs that suggest many stories. Because she collects old photographs from thrift stores, all the people in her works are unknown to her. After Lopez puts these people together in new combinations and adds photographs of landscapes that she has taken, she makes up a title that encourages viewers to create their own stories. These narratives are as individual as her audience and their memories.

People, Land, and Time

Lopez began making digitized photographs in 1986, the year her father died. She spent many hours looking through snapshots of her childhood and of her family. She had already spent years listening to stories about and looking at photographs of her oldest brother, who was killed in Vietnam when she was four. Lopez realized that her memories and the pictures in her mind did not always agree with the family...
photographs. She wondered if she could figure out who her father and brother had been by using pictures to help her recreate her memories of the past. Lopez came to realize that with a computer she could cut and paste images to tell her version of her family history.

After her first early explorations with family photographs and the computer, Lopez became interested in creating images featuring people she did not know. She began hunting for late-nineteenth-century photographs, frequently rummaging through thrift stores in search of them. Although the artist will never know these people, she often creates stories about them, or links their lives to hers, through the titles she gives her photographs. The broad hips of the woman to the left in *Heirs Come to Pass*, 3, for example, remind Lopez of her mother, who had three of her eight children by the age of twenty-nine. Lopez was twenty-nine when she made *Heirs Come to Pass*, 3, and was an unmarried artist leading a life very different from that of her mother. The little girl looking around at the world through the lens of a hand-held camera also reminds Lopez of herself.

Landscape plays a crucial role in the creation of Lopez’s photographs. The first works that she created after her father’s death were images of a family car trip. In them, she used landscape as a metaphor for her father’s life journey, based on the idea that as people travel through a landscape, they leave a mark or a trace. Lopez now continually uses landscape as a metaphor for a person’s life. Wherever she goes, she takes photographs of clouds and landscapes to build a supply of images. She will also go out to take a photograph that she envisions for a particular work.

Landscape enters her work at different points in the process of creation. Lopez began with the vibrant landscape that evokes her love of the mountains and water surrounding her childhood home of Seattle, Washington. In *Revolutions in Time*, 1, Lopez started with the husband and wife, then placed an industrial landscape in the background. Finally, she added smaller-sized figures, who she feels suggest the many individu-
als a person will come to know over the course of a lifetime.

The sense of time, or timelessness, evoked by Lopez’s photographs inspire viewers to create stories about the works. The dress and postures of the people in the late-nineteenth-century photographs remind viewers of the time that has passed between when the people were photographed and today. These older photographs also contrast with the contemporary photographs of skies and land that Lopez herself takes. Further, the artist eliminates shadows from her finished photographs to represent all time. The viewer can then create a story based on that timeless, fabricated moment.

Lopez titles each work after it is completed. The title marks the point where creation of the image ends and creation of the story begins, since, with their puns and other forms of word play, the words in the title suggest multiple interpretations for each photograph. The word “heirs,” for example, can refer to different types of inheritance, ranging from a cultural legacy to accumulated wealth/possessions passed on from ancestors. Heirs can also inherit the mistakes or errors (a homonym for “heirs”) of a family’s history. Just as parents do their best to correct the errors of the past when raising their children, the parents’ own errors (or “heirs”) will be corrected over time. In Lopez’s photograph, heirs come to pass before those looking at the photograph. What, the viewer may ask, will happen in the future to those heirs in the photograph?

Through the mix of old photographs and new backgrounds, Lopez hopes that her works will encourage viewers to make up their own stories about the people in them. Both *Heirs Come to Pass*, 3 and *Revolutions in Time*, 1 are taken from series that explore relationships among the individuals in the photographs and between these individuals and the viewers of the photograph. Because her work inspires both her own and others’ personal responses, Lopez often refers to her photographs as “visual diaries.”
Martina Lopez (born 1962)

Martina Lopez was born and raised in Seattle, Washington. She is a second generation Mexican American. Although she does not speak Spanish, Lopez believes that her large family (she is the seventh of eight children) has the characteristics of a traditional Mexican family. Lopez studied photography at the University of Washington and received her MFA from The School of The Art Institute of Chicago. She is currently on the faculty of art at the University of Notre Dame, in South Bend, Indiana.

How Are the Photographs Made?

Lopez begins by composing the collage photograph in her mind. Once she has envisioned the image, Lopez scans the old photographs she has found of people and the new photographs she has taken of landscapes. With the computer, she digitizes her selected images. Lopez makes changes in dimension, hue, and color during the entire process. In 1986, the photographs she produced had large pixels which made the image appear coarse. Due to technological advances, she can now produce sharper images. Hence, her finished photographs appear exactly as she sees them on the computer screen.

Once Lopez completes the final composition on the computer, she sends the disk to a photography lab which makes a a four-by-five inch transparency made from the computer disk. Using this transparency, a lab produces large-scale photographic prints in color.

After the photographic work is printed, Lopez chooses the title and the process of creating stories is begun.
Glossary

Collage: A two-dimensional work of art incorporating materials and/or objects that have been collected and then attached together.

Digitize: A process in which a paper image is converted into pixels. The computer “takes a photograph” of the image by scanning it with a video or digital camera.

Homonym: One of two or more words that have the same sound and often the same spelling but that differ in meaning.

Pixels: The dots on the computer screen that make up an image. When combined, the pixels form different shapes and colors.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

*Heirs Come to Pass, 3* by Martina Lopez

Who do you think these people are?

Choose one person. What is he or she doing?

Describe the landscape.

Ask these questions of the class:

- Where did your family come from?
- How many people do you live with?
- Who is the most important person in your life?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

To make her pictures, Martina Lopez scans photographs that she has taken or found into the computer. She then arranges these elements in a final composition that suggests different stories.

ART ACTIVITY: *Collage*

Create your own version of a Martina Lopez photograph.

- Choose the background provided by the artist or draw your own.

- Collect pictures of people and furniture. Use magazines, newspapers, or photographs as source material.

- Cut out and arrange the pictures in the landscape.

- Glue the pictures down and make up a title for your collage.
WRITING ACTIVITY: *A Family's History*

Write a story about the characters in *Heirs Come to Pass, 3* or *Revolutions in Time, 1*.

- Choose the main characters in the picture. Give them each a name.
- Describe the action taking place among the characters.
- Include dialogue between characters.

Write a fictional biography about one character in *Heirs Come to Pass, 3* or *Revolutions in Time, 1*.

- Choose a name for the character.
- Include details about the character’s life such as childhood events, schooling, type of work, and characteristics of family members and friends.

COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY: *Family Albums*

Create a classroom family album.

- Bring in a photograph from your family album.
- Write a story about the person or people in the photograph from stories you were told by family members.
- Display the photographs, accompanied by the stories, in the classroom.
Student Bibliography (Grades 2–8)

On Family Histories


**On Photography**


**On Photographers**


**Taking Photographs**


**Videos on Photography**


**Teacher Bibliography**


Slide List

Bernardo Martorell (Spanish, about 1400–1452)
Saint George Killing the Dragon, 1430/1435
Tempera on panel
Gift of Mrs. Richard E. Danielson and Mrs. Chauncey McCormick, 1953.786

India, Tanjore District, Late Vijayanagar Period
Statue of a Standing Vishnu, 16th century
Bronze
Robert Allerton Collection, 1969.699

Africa, Nigeria, Kingdom of Benin; Edo
Royal Altar Tusk, Mid-19th century
Ivory
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Hokin, 1976.525

Attributed to John Quidor (American, 1800–1881)
Rip Van Winkle, 1829
Oil on canvas
George F. Harding Collection, 1982.765

Walter Ellison (American, 1900–1977)
Train Station, 1956
Oil on canvas
Charles M. Kurtz Charitable Trust and Barbara Neff Smith and Solomon Byron Smith funds; through prior gifts of Florence Jane Adams, Mr. and Mrs. Carter H. Harrison, and Estate of Celia Schmidt, 1990.134.

Martina Lopez, American (born 1962)
Heirs Come to Pass, 3, 1991
Silver-dye bleach print made from a digitally assisted montage
Promised gift of David C. and Sarajean Ruttenberg, courtesy of the Ruttenberg Arts Foundation