EMBRACING OUR DIFFERENCES AT The Ringling
INTRODUCTION

This guide produced by The Ringling Museum has been designed to complement the Embracing Our Differences curriculum. It highlights issues of injustice, personal responsibility, bravery, identity, and compassion through a selection of objects that encourage students to think about representation and inclusion throughout the history of art.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the conclusion of this teacher-guided tour, students will:

- Discuss the messages represented in each work of art and how those messages may be relevant to their own lives
- Use gender as one lens to understand historical exclusion and limited representation, and what impact that has on the human experience today
- Engage with a variety of objects in The Ringling collection, building visual, literary and social-emotional learning skills through the close-reading of artworks

USING THE GUIDE

In today’s society, open and honest dialogue between individuals is more important than ever. We can foster social cohesion by inspiring dialogue that supports the development of a civil society, from its smallest unit—the individual—outward to the family, the school, the community, the nation, and the world.

This guide has been created in a modular form. There are three thematic modules Stand Up: Stories of Courage, Representation: A Seat at the Table, and On Display: Objectified Bodies, each of which include 3 works of art related to that theme. For each artwork, you will find a summary of its meaning, suggested discussion points, and an extension activity if you want to continue the conversation.

You do not need to follow any particular order when viewing these objects. Each thematic module can be adapted for any grade level, although please note that the module designed for high school students contains references to sexuality and exploitation. We recommend reading through the background information for each work before you engage students with the discussion questions. You can weave in context about each artwork as necessary to support students’ conversation and analysis.

- STAND UP: STORIES OF COURAGE | Elementary | Pages 2–5
- REPRESENTATION: A SEAT AT THE TABLE | Middle | Pages 6–9
- ON DISPLAY: OBJECTIFIED BODIES | High | Pages 10–15
It's not always easy to do the right thing! It can require a lot of bravery to speak up for others, live by your own values, and show compassion in the face of adversity. How do you address bullying in your school or in your neighborhood? How does it feel to stand up for yourself, or for others, in the face of danger?

**ESTHER BEFORE AHASUERUS**

**BACKGROUND**

This painting tells the story of Esther, who heroically saved her people from certain destruction. Esther was married to the Persian king Ahasuerus (AY-haz-yoo-EER-uhs), who didn’t know Esther was Jewish. When Ahasuerus signed a law that would massacre all Jewish people, Esther knew she had to stand up for her people. Here we see Esther pleading to the king to change his mind, even though to approach the king without invitation was punishable by death. Ultimately, Ahasuerus reversed the decree to massacre the Jewish people. Esther saved her people by being courageous and speaking up for what was right.

**VISUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION POINTS**

There’s a lot going on in this painting! Let’s figure out the story we see here.

- Who do you think is the most important person in this painting? Why do you think that? Who else are the important characters?
- What is happening in the background? How does that scene build the tension for what is happening with Esther and Ahasuerus in the foreground?

Standing up for what’s right when there are dangerous consequences can be frightening and overwhelming. Esther summoned incredible courage by approaching the king to save her people. If the king had been insulted by Esther’s request, not only would Esther lose her life, but all of her friends, family, and entire community would die as well.

Esther could have chosen to live the rest of her life safe in the king’s palace, pretending she wasn’t Jewish.

- What consequences would that decision have for Esther?
- Why do you think Esther made the decision she did: to stand up for herself and her community and to reveal her true identity? Are there parts of your identity that you keep hidden in certain situations? If so, how does that feel?
- Think about a time you had to show a lot of courage. What did that feel like? What helped you be brave?
- How can you support other people who are being brave and doing the right thing when it is difficult to do so? What forms could your support take?

**LEARNING EXTENSION**

Acting out a painting is a great way to understand what all the characters are doing and feeling. Assign each student to a figure in the painting and ask them to pose like the painting. Make sure each student is at least 3 feet from the wall when acting out the painting. Ask students:

- How does it feel to be in this position?
- What is your character doing? Feeling? Going to do next?
**PLOWING IN THE NIVERNAIS (LABOURAGES NIVERNAIS)**

**BACKGROUND**
This tranquil scene of oxen plowing a fertile landscape shows us the virtues of hard work and country life. The artist, Rosa Bonheur, was one of the leading animal painters of the 19th century, and she intimately studied the natural landscape and the anatomy of animals. Bonheur studied animals in traditionally male-dominated spaces such as farms, live auctions, and slaughterhouses. She attained police permission to dress in man’s clothing, which was a highly unconventional and widely disdained choice to make at the time. Rosa Bonheur stood up for her right to be an artist, to not marry a man, and to wear what she wanted.

**VISUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION POINTS**
This painting is very lifelike! Let’s look closely to see what we can discover about the painting.
• How many oxen can you find? How many workers?
• What actions are taking place in this painting? What work is being accomplished?

Due to the nature of her work and her personal style preferences, Bonheur chose to dress in pants and even had to obtain permission from government officials to do so.
• How do you think Rosa Bonheur felt when she had to ask others for permission to dress in a way that felt right to her?
• How did Rosa Bonheur demonstrate bravery by wearing what she was comfortable wearing? How do you think other people might have responded to her choice?
• If you saw someone being bullied for the way they dress, what could you do to be an upstander instead of a bystander?

**LEARNING EXTENSION**
Back in the classroom, challenge students to research 5 women artists and their work. Explain why each artist was influential and find three works of art by each artist.

Join the conversation online every March with #5womenartists—an initiative by the National Museum of Women in the Arts that calls attention to the underrepresentation women have in the art world, and seeks to address that by asking the question, can you name #5womenartists?

**Teaching Tip:** Did you know that the Ringling collection is available online? Visit [emuseum.ringling.org](http://emuseum.ringling.org) and search by object number, title, or artist to find an image of the artwork and additional information!
PARVATI AND DURGA

BACKGROUND

In Hinduism, gods and goddess can take many different forms and identities, each with different attributes and purposes. Parvati is an important deity in the Hindu religion, known as the mother goddess of beauty, love, fertility, marriage and devotion. The Goddess also takes the form of the powerful Durga, a warrior who fights demons and fiercely protects the good and peaceful.

VISUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION POINTS

- Parvati can transform herself into many different identities or manifestations. How would you describe Parvati’s appearance in this sculpture? What attributes do you think she might represent in this form?
- Compare the bronze sculpture of Parvati to the stone sculpture of Durga nearby. What similarities between the two do you notice? What differences? What attributes does the sculpture of Durga have?
- How can you “transform” yourself when called upon to fight evil or to protect good? What kind of attributes do you need to embody when you are being brave and standing up for what is right?
- If you could have an alter ego who helped you be brave in scary situations, what would that character look like? What powers would they have? What would they wear? What tools would they use?

LEARNING EXTENSION

Most people have many sides to their personality. We all have the capacity to be both gently compassionate and fiercely protective toward people we love.

- Compare the statue of the Guanyin, a bodhisattva of compassion, with the guardian figure next to it.
- What characteristics does the Guanyin have that suggest compassion? What about the guardian figure suggests bravery?
- Study the facial expressions, postures, and gestures of the two sculptures as you compare them. What lessons can we learn from both figures about what it takes to be a brave and kind upstander?

What does it mean to say someone has “a seat at the table?” Sometimes, we mean it literally—we are describing who is physically present around the table during meetings when important decisions are being made. And sometimes, we use that phrase as a metaphor. Shirley Chisholm was the first African American woman in Congress (elected 1968). Chisholm was a strong advocate for women’s and civil rights and once said “If they don’t offer you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair.” What do you think she meant by that? How does her statement relate to larger ideas about exclusion, representation, and influence?

A PORTRAIT GROUP OF PARISIAN CELEBRITIES

BACKGROUND

This painting is just one piece of a larger mural created for the World’s Fair in Paris in 1889. The complete mural (recreated below, with the Ringling’s section highlighted in red) included important celebrities and public figures from the past 100 years of French history.

After the close of the fair, the large mural was divided into sections and dispersed. The section now on display at The Ringling includes celebrities from the literary and performing arts, including the actress Sarah Bernhardt, who is wearing the white costume of one of the queen characters she played.

VISUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Looking at the details and people in this painting can tell us a lot about what and who was considered important when it was made.

- How many different personalities seem to be represented here? Who seems the most intimidating? The most unapproachable? The friendliest?
- What are you using to make these judgements? What can’t we know about these people just from looking at them?
- What types of people are missing from this painting? What does that tell you about the values of 19th century French society? Who did they consider to be the most important?
- There are four women in this painting, the prominent actress Sarah Bernhardt (in white), novelist Juliette Adam (in red), actress Jeanne Julie Regnault Bartet (in the black hat) and an unknown woman (in blue). Why do you think there are so few women?

The two artists who created this mural, Alfred Stevens and Henri Gervex, spent a lot of time doing research to help them decide which people they thought were important enough to be included in their painting.

- Can you think of a situation where you have the power to decide who is included and who is excluded? How do you make those decisions? What factors impact your choices?
- How does it feel to be excluded from something? What can you do to make sure others around you do not experience exclusion or discrimination?

LEARNING EXTENSION

Discuss some of the ways people experience exclusion or erasure.

- If you were to create your own panorama of important figures from the past 100 years of American history, who would you include and why?
- How would you ensure that people who have historically been overlooked are included in your project? Who are some of these people, and how have you learned about them?
SAPPHO INSPIRED BY LOVE

BACKGROUND

Sappho (pronounced SAFF-oh) was an ancient Greek poet born around 620 BCE. She was considered one of the greatest poets of the ancient world and is still revered today. Sappho wrote about themes of love, longing, power, and persuasion. Here, we can assume that Sappho is writing a love poem, as she seems to be consulting with Cupid, the god who represents desire.

This painting was made by Angelica Kauffmann, one of the most successful artists of the 18th century. At that time, it was unusual for women to be painters. Women were not expected to have jobs and earn their own income; rather, women were confined to the domestic sphere of keeping a home and raising children. Nonetheless, Kauffmann was an extremely talented child prodigy who was painting portraits professionally by her early teens. She was also one of the founding members of the Royal Academy of Arts in London, an organization devoted to the promotion of visual art.

VISUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION POINTS

• What do you notice first in this painting?
• What do you think is going on between these two figures?
• What can we guess about what is being written on the tablet?

Sappho is an example of a successful and influential woman writer from Antiquity.

• Why do you think Angelica Kauffman, the artist, might have been interested in the subject of Sappho?
• What professions have traditionally been held primarily by men? By women?
• Why might professions have traditionally excluded a group of people based on their gender or other parts of their identity?
• Think of some examples from your own life when people assumed you liked a certain thing just because of how they perceived your gender. How did that make you feel?

LEARNING EXTENSION

In addition to gender, race and ethnicity have played a huge role in determining whether someone had access to wealth, privilege, and certain professions. People in power enforced systems of discrimination and oppression to maintain their own status and subjugate others.

Look at the painting titled John Manners, Marquess of Granby in Gallery 16. The title of this painting refers to the man standing in front of the horse—but of course, there is another person in this portrait as well.

• Ask students who they think the other figure might be. Why isn’t his name included in the painting’s title?
• Little is known about the identity of the Black person in this painting, including whether or not he was enslaved. Why do you think he was included in this portrait? Do you think he is depicted respectfully? Why or why not?
• What more do you wish we could discover about him? What are you curious about? In what ways do you think the museum should tell his story?
CRUCIFIXION

BACKGROUND

In 1927, stone carver William Edmondson (American, 1874–1951) began making gravestones for the Black community in Nashville, Tennessee. Edmondson used a railroad spike and household tools as his chisels, hammering local limestone into geometric grave markers. Under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration, a government-sponsored artists’ relief program during the 1930s and 1940s, the artist produced numerous hand-held sculptures of animals, biblical subjects, and human figures, including nurses, preachers, boxers, local community leaders, and celebrities of the early 20th century.

VISUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Crucifixion portrays the figure of Jesus as powerful but uses a minimalist aesthetic, with the face consisting of few indentations for features, and the limbs rendered without hands or toes.

- Did you immediately recognize this as a crucifixion? Why or why not?
- What about this depiction is unexpected for you?
- Share your initial interpretations and assumptions about this work. How does everyone bring a different frame of reference to this imagery?

Historically, museums valued paintings and sculptures by white male artists, and that has shaped what we expect to see when we visit a museum.

- Why do you think there’s a hierarchy in which certain art forms are more valued than others? How do you think this hierarchy was established?
- Why is it important to expand our definition of “museum-worthy” art? Who gets to decide what is valuable, and what impact do those decisions have on young aspiring artists?
- If you were building a museum from scratch, what kinds of artworks would you want to include? What could you do to make sure that a diversity of artists were represented in your collection?

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LEARNING EXTENSION

Helen Gerardia (1903–1988) was an important artist whose work is less well-known than her male counterparts even today. Gerardia, whose work can also be found in this exhibition, was a key figure in the Abstract Expressionist and Cubist movements, and she is most known for her geometric abstractions rendered in vivid colors.

We don’t usually discuss male artists using the phrase “male artist,” but it is common to note on a woman’s gender when describing her as a “woman artist.”

- Why do you think we use the phrase “woman artist”?
- What does that suggest about museums, both historically and today?
- What implications does that have for how we think about the artist and their artwork?
Throughout history, women’s bodies have often been the subject of artwork—most of which was created by male artists for male audiences. In art, we call that the “male gaze.” When women’s bodies are put on display by an artist, does that mean the woman is objectified? What does “objectification” mean to you? How do you decide if an artwork is celebrating the body or exploiting it? How do new understandings of gender and non-binary identity impact these kinds of discussions?

**SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS**

**BACKGROUND**

This is a story of blackmail. Susannah thinks she is alone taking a bath when two male elders appear and try to coerce her into sexual relations. They tell her that unless she gives in to them, they will spread a lie that they saw her with a young lover who was not her husband. The punishment for committing adultery was the death penalty, so Susannah is faced with an impossible choice: sleep with the two men who are threatening her or have them spread the lie that she has already committed adultery. It is only after the elders are cross-examined separately that they are exposed as liars and Susannah is saved.

**VISUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION POINTS**

This story was a popular subject for artists, ostensibly because Susannah was a heroine who symbolized justice, righteousness, and loyalty to her husband. However, her story was used by artists as a pretext for depicting a young, attractive, nude female body.

- How is the story depicted in the painting?
- How did the artist convey each of the characters?
- What is the mood of this scene?
- Do you think the artist wants us to feel sympathetic to Susannah? Why or why not?
- Who do you think the intended audience for this painting would have been when it was originally created?

Though this painting was made in the early 17th century, it still resonates with us today, though perhaps in a different way than the artist and original audience anticipated. Today, sexual harassment is being challenged and confronted like never before.

- What do you know about the #MeToo movement? How would you define it?
- How has the #MeToo movement and other related discussions changed or challenged your own feelings about sexual harassment?

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LEARNING EXTENSION

Compare Susannah and the Elders with the painting hanging next to it, Judith with the Head of Holofernes by artist Francesco Cairo. This story also comes from the Old Testament and begins when the Assyrian general Holofernes became enamored with Judith, who is described as a beautiful young widow. Holofernes invited her into his tent with the aim of seducing her, but Judith, with the help of her maidservant, uses his own sword to decapitate him. In doing so, she saved her town from being destroyed by Holofernes and his army.

Judith was considered a hero, even though she committed an act of murder.

- How are the judgments passed on Susannah and Judith different?
- How do consent and sexual power dynamics play into these stories?
- How do you think the artist wanted us to feel about Judith? What do you see in the painting that helps you decide?
JUDGMENT OF PARIS

BACKGROUND
The Judgment of Paris depicts a scene from mythology that tells how the Trojan War began. When the goddess of discord, Eris, tossed a golden apple to the gods as a gift for the fairest of them all, three goddesses claimed the prize. The gods couldn’t decide which goddess was most lovely, so they asked Paris, a Trojan prince raised by shepherds, to judge the beauty competition... an impossible task! Each goddess attempted to bribe Paris into choosing her: Aphrodite offered Paris the love of Helen, the most beautiful mortal woman in the world. Athena promised Paris valor, fame, and the ability win every war he waged. Hera offered Paris riches and kingdoms. Paris ultimately chose Aphrodite as the most beautiful of three goddesses and received the love of Helen as his reward. However, Helen was already married to the Greek king Menelaos, and when she ran off with Paris, it sparked the war between the Greeks and the Trojans.

VISUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION POINTS
The three goddesses here all wanted to be crowned as the most beautiful, and each attempted to bribe Paris into giving them the golden apple.

- How do you think this story would differ if it were told from the point of view of the goddesses? How would the narrative change? What might the additional backstory be?
- Do any elements of this story or painting seem sexist to you? Why or why not?
- The artist depicts Paris as he judges the competition. The three goddesses are in varying stages of undress, hoping to tempt Paris into crowning them the winner. Why do you think the artist shows the goddess undressing? How does this contribute to the story being told? How are their bodies being used to determine the goddesses’ worth?

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LEARNING EXTENSION

This painting tells the story of Narcissus, a beautiful young man who was desired by almost everyone he met—men, women, and even mythological creatures. When he spurned the advances of the nymph Echo, she became heartbroken and wasted away until only her voice was left. To punish him for his cruelty, Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, led Narcissus to a clear pool where he fell in love with his own reflection. Narcissus pined away after his own image until he died, and his body was transformed into the white narcissus flower.

Both Narcissus and the goddess Aphrodite in *Judgement of Paris* are in the same degree of undress.

- What impressions do you have of Aphrodite, compared to Narcissus?
- Do you think the gender of each character impacted how the artists chose to portray them?

The story of Narcissus led to the word “narcissistic.”

- What does “narcissism” mean to you? Do you agree with critics who argue that social media has made younger generations more narcissistic?
- What is the difference between confidently celebrating yourself and becoming too self-involved?
- What role does social media play in how young people today feel about their bodies?
BACKGROUND

In 1903, French artist Gaston Lachaise met and fell in love with Isabel Dutaud Nagle, a married American woman, while they were both in Paris. Lachaise followed Nagle back to the United States in 1906, and they moved to New York City together in 1912. They eventually married. Throughout their relationship, Nagle served as Lachaise's muse, or inspiration, and he created many depictions of her as his interpretation of the ideal female body.

VISUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Let's study the sculpture as a work of art, discovering meaning as we observe.

- How would you describe this woman's gesture?
- Why do you think the artist chose to portray the woman with her eyes closed?
- In your opinion, how does this sculpture represent both heaviness and lightness?
- The woman shown here is obviously nude. Sexual objectification means treating a person solely as an object of desire, without considering their own agency or humanity. Do you consider this sculpture to be a celebration of the female body, or is this objectification? Explain the reasons behind your thinking.

Lachaise depicted Nagle's body over and over again in his work, and he was deeply in love with her. Nagle posed for her husband’s work often, knowing the artwork would be on public display.

- Does knowing the backstory of this artwork change your interpretation of it? Why or why not?
- This sculpture is modeled after a real woman's body. How is it different from, or similar to, depictions of bodies in classical sculpture or idealized representations? How have society's standards about the “ideal” body changed over the years? What pressures does the idea of an “ideal” body place on people?

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LEARNING EXTENSION

We’ve been discussing objectification of the female form in art, but female bodies are not the only nude figures we see in the museum. The courtyard is filled with bronze casts of famous ancient Greek and Roman sculptures, as well as one, the David, from the Italian Renaissance. In ancient Greece and Rome, depicting the human form in the nude was an expression of reverence as artists sought to express perfection. Renaissance artists, such as Michelangelo, imitated the classical sculptures, celebrating and idealizing the human form.

• Compare the image of the nude David with the sculpture Elevation. How does the mood of each sculpture compare? As a viewer, does it feel different seeing a legendary Biblical figure, David, nude compared to a real woman, Isabel Dutaud Nagle? Why or why not?

• What’s next? How can the art world, and the way we look at art, move from a position of objectification to empowerment and celebration? How do new understandings of gender as non-binary impact how we think about the human body and how to represent it?
The Ringling is proud to partner with Embracing Our Differences to advance conversations about issues of diversity and inclusion through the transformative power of the arts.