

Looking Deeper: Finding Meaning Through Cultural Context

When faced with an unfamiliar artwork, students often will say they "don't get it" and simply give up on trying to understand the question of "Why is this art?".

This ArtsConnectEd set was created for high school students and teachers as one way to begin the conversation about making meaningful connections to works of contemporary art.

In this set students will be asked to reflect on their own personal and cultural experiences as a "jumping off" point to find meaning in a work of art. The study of cultural experiences shaping art making can be a study in and of itself, or the set can be used with the suggested photography assignment as well. Teachers may find this resource to be most useful as a combination of classroom teaching tool and independent student study, but this set may also be adapted as a pre- or post- museum visit activity.

Before beginning, teachers are strongly encouraged to use the [Visual Thinking Strategies](#) technique as a means of encouraging critical thinking and discussion when looking at each artwork.

Theme in life: we all seek meaning in our lives

Theme in life and art: art can express shared human experiences or have individual meaning to the artist

Essential inquiry question: How do personal and cultural experiences influence what an artist creates?

Universal Themes in Art



Looking Deeper: Finding Meaning Through Cultural Context

by Alicia Dolentz

We do not exist alone; we have shared human experiences and feelings that transcend time, place, and culture. Sometimes artists use themes that are universally understood. Look at the artwork on this slide and the next and reflect on the idea of themes that are broadly understood.

Discussion:

What is going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find?

What words would you use to describe this work of art by artist Käthe Kollwitz?

What type of feeling does this artwork convey?

Do you believe this artwork can easily be understood by everyone? Why or why not?

Artist: Käthe Kollwitz

Medium: Prints, Edition Prints/Proofs

Size: sheet 22.75 x 16.625 inches

Institution: Walker Art Center

Accession #: 1953.33

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Discussion:

What is going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can you find?

What theme do you believe this artwork communicates?

What symbols did the artist use to communicate his idea?

Do you believe this artwork can easily be understood by everyone? Why or why not?

Artist: William Gropper

Date: 1940

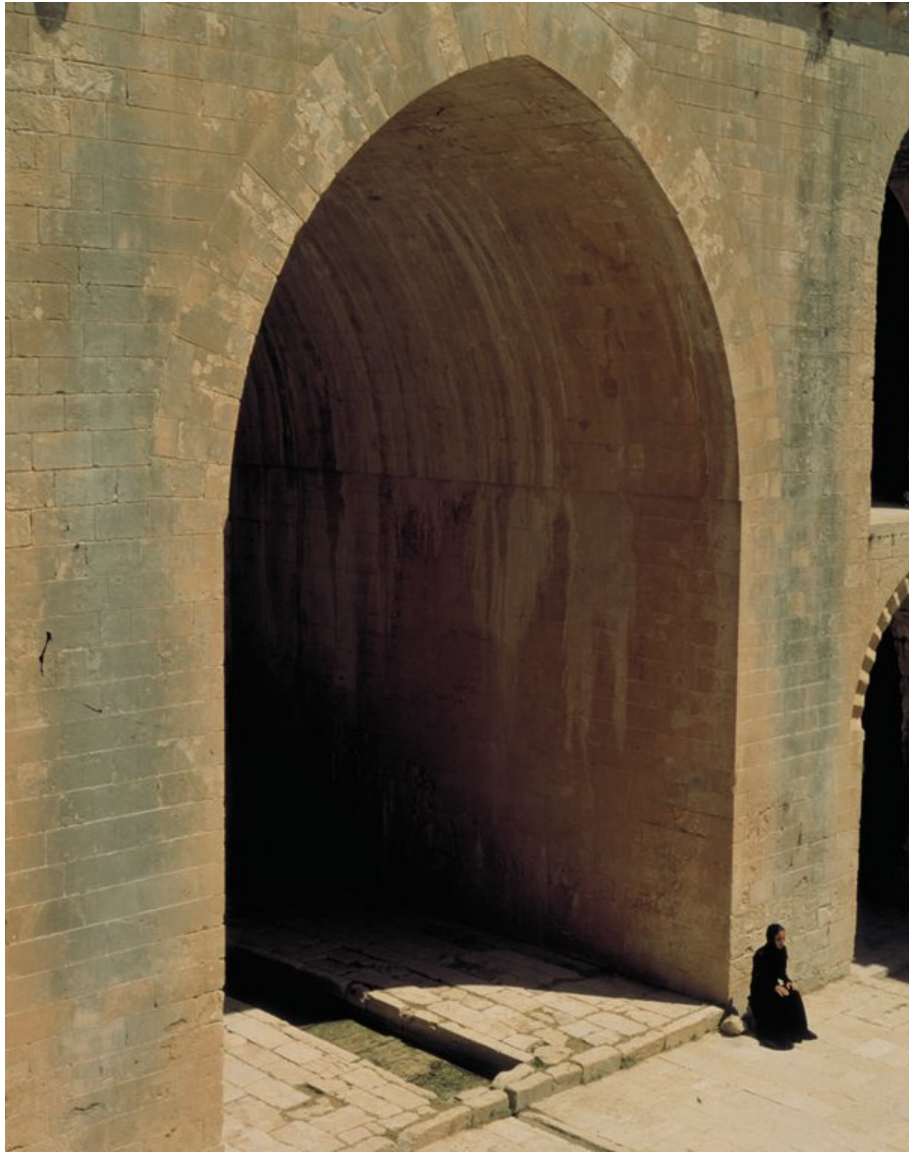
Medium: Paintings

Size: unframed 47.75 x 36.125 x inches

Institution: Walker Art Center

Accession #: 1943.13

Soliloquy



Looking Deeper: Finding Meaning Through Cultural Context

by Alicia Dolentz

While some artists' works communicate broadly understood feelings and ideas, others communicate meaning that is deeply personal to the artist. Without immediately knowing about the life and experiences of the artist, we must draw conclusions about an artwork's meaning based on our own life experiences and understanding.

Each one of us approaches an artwork with a unique set of experiences and cultural values. Look at the image on the left and answer the following questions based on your own life experiences:

Discussion:

What is going on in this picture?

What do you see that makes you say that?

What more can you find?

What do you believe the artist's purpose was in creating this artwork? Why?

Artist: Shirin Neshat

Date: 1999

Medium: Media Arts, Videotapes/Videodiscs, Audio-Video

Institution: Walker Art Center

Accession #: 2000.100.1-.6

Soliloquy: West v. East

On the two following slides, you will view Shirin Neshat's *Soliloquy*. This is the most autobiographical of Shirin Neshat's works, and examines self-identity.

This work is meant to be shown on two screens that face each other, thus placing the view in between. *Play the videos simultaneously to provide the best opportunity to compare and contrast both films.*

One screen depicts a veiled Neshat roaming through an anonymous modern cityscape (filmed in Albany, New York). On the other, she is similarly dressed but traverses a traditional Eastern cityscape (Mardin, Turkey).

Using your own cultural references as a starting point, watch the film and draw as many conclusions as you can about the meaning behind the piece. After watching *Soliloquy*, continue the slideshow to learn more about Shirin Neshat's life and inspiration for the work.

Soliloquy: Part 1/2 (play videos simultaneously)



Soliloquy: Part 2/2 (play videos simultaneously)



Shirin Neshat: Biography

Read more about artist Shirin Neshat and look at the question below:

Shirin Neshat was born and raised in Iran, but was sent to the United States at the age of 17 to study art. When she was 22 years old, in 1979, the Islamic Revolution overtook Iran. She did not return for 11 years. During that time Iran went through major cultural and social changes, and by the time Neshat went there in 1990 she barely recognized her country. This experience affected her deeply, as she has said, "I can never call any place home. I will forever be in a state of in-between." Shirin Neshat stands between cultures metaphorically, psychologically, and socially, and she explores this feeling in her films and photographs.

Reflection:

What are some life experiences (both good and bad) that shaped you in a profound way?

If you turned your life experiences into artworks, what would they look like? Which people or things will you show? What symbols would you choose to use? Would everyone be able to understand your artwork, or would it have significant meaning only to you?

Artist: Walker Art Center

Date: 2003

Medium: Commentary, online content

Institution: Walker Art Center

Shirin Neshat, *Soliloquy* (track 1)



Listen to this commentary to learn more about the meaning behind *Soliloquy*.

When you're finished, watch the YouTube video to hear more about Shirin Neshat's life and work.

Discussion:

Did your interpretation of Soliloquy change after hearing further explanation from Shirin Neshat? If so, how?

Artist: Art on Call
Date: August 25, 2006
Medium: Commentary, Artist Comments
Institution: Walker Art Center

Culture is More than a Country

Shirin Neshat's unique view on her definition of "culture" have undoubtedly shaped her work. Although many of Neshat's themes come from contrasting the cultures of two different countries, we all have distinct cultural experiences. The idea of "culture" does not need to be an international one. We all encounter culture in our everyday lives.

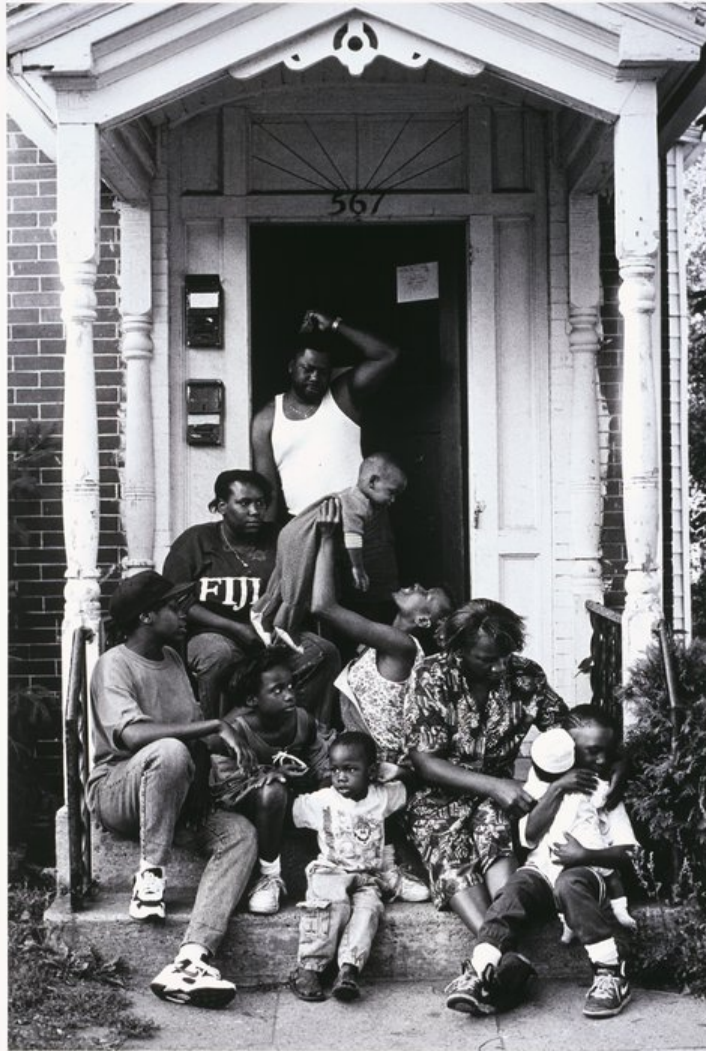
Reflect on the following questions as you think about your own cultural experiences:

Think about your community. Are there events and celebrations that are special in your town?

Think about your school. Are there activities, traditions, or ways of talking or dressing that are unique to your school?

Think about your family. Are there special foods, traditions, or activities that are unique to your family?

Family on Front Steps - Frogtown



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Shirin Neshat's work expresses her experience in a world where she is "between" cultures. Her work communicates many ideas about the idea of identity and trying to find a sense of belonging. Her life and experiences have shaped the reason for why she creates.

Although his life experience is far different from that of Neshat, Minnesota photographer [Wing Young Huie](#)'s work also reflects the culture around him on the streets of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Huie is best known for his large-scale photography projects such as [Frogtown](#), [Lake Street USA](#), and [The University Avenue Project](#). Through his documentation of each of these areas/neighborhoods, Huie documents the broad array of socioeconomic and cultural realities in American society.

Artist: Wing Young Huie

Date: 1996

Medium: Photographs

Size: sheet 20 x 15.6875 inches

Institution: Walker Art Center

Accession #: 1996.87

Wing Young Huie



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Duluth native Wing Young Huie's photographs document the changing cultural landscape of Minnesota. Focusing on neighborhoods in transition, he photographs residents and business owners, children and adults, new immigrants and longtime residents. Huie captures and celebrates the character of a neighborhood for all of its cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity.

(Source: mncoriginal.org)

Watch the video to find out more about Huie's projects and artistic process.

Discussion:

What are some of the various types of cultures that Huie documents? (remember, culture is more than a country)

What are some different methods he uses to document the people and neighborhoods he photographs?

After watching the video, what are some people and places in your own neighborhood that you could document in your work?

Wing Young Huie is the child of a Chinese immigrant, the only one in his family to be born an American. Do you think that his cultural experiences influence his art making? Why or why not?

Your Turn: Photos from Your Life



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After learning about the importance of culture shaping what artists create, it's your turn.

Your assignment will be to create a series of 5 photographs that document different "cultural" aspects of your life. You could show your family culture, neighborhood culture, school culture, etc.

Neshat's works tell a story about her cultural experiences, Huie's works tell a story about the local culture around him, and your photos will tell a story about your own cultural reality.

As you think about possible photographic subjects from your own life, gather ideas by learning about Wing Young Huie's artistic process and viewing more of his artworks.

The following links will show you more from Huie's most recent large-scale effort, *The University Avenue Project* (2010):

[Process behind The University Avenue Project](#)

[Images from The University Avenue Project](#)

Reflect:

What similarities and differences do you see when you compare these images to your own neighborhood?

(Left: Photo from [Wing Young Huie's *The University Avenue Project*](#))

Culture Shapes What We Create



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by Alicia Dolentz

After looking at this ArtsConnectEd set, continue to look for the idea of understanding art through a "cultural lens". Some artists create using universal themes that can be understood by all, others create using a combination of culture and personal meaning, and still others create works of art that hold deeply personal meaning understood only to them.

No matter what the source of inspiration, what we create is shaped by our lives and experiences. As you begin your series of photographs, ask yourself if you want your photos to be universally understood, understood within a certain culture, or so personal that they will only be understood by you.

Remember, your "culture" is all around you. Reflect on the people, places, and events of your daily life as a springboard to begin.

Good luck!

(Left: Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*)