

# GRANT WOOD TEACHER GUIDE

March 2–June 10, 2018

WHITNEY



# WELCOME TO THE WHITNEY!

Dear Teachers,

We are delighted to welcome you to the exhibition, *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*, on view at the Museum through June 10, 2018. Wood's most famous painting, *American Gothic*, is perhaps the most recognizable painting in twentieth century American art and an indelible icon of Americana, but his career consists of far more than a single painting. This exhibition brings together the full range of Wood's art, from his early Arts and Crafts decorative objects and Impressionist oils through his mature paintings, murals, and book illustrations.

This teacher guide provides a framework for preparing you and your students for a visit to the exhibition and offers suggestions for follow up classroom reflection and lessons. The discussions and activities introduce some of the exhibition's key themes and concepts.

We look forward to welcoming you and your students at the Museum.

Enjoy your visit!

The School and Educator Programs team

# CONTENTS

3-4	<b>About the exhibition</b> <b>Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables</b>
5	<b>Pre-visit Activities</b>
5	<b>Artist as Storyteller: American Tale</b> <b>K-5, 6-8, 9-12</b>
6	<b>Artist as Observer: Ode to the Ordinary</b> <b>K-5, 6-8, 9-12</b>
6	<b>Artist as Experimenter: By Design</b> <b>K-5, 6-8, 9-12</b>
7-11	<b>Images and Information</b>
12	<b>Post-visit Activities</b>
12	<b>Museum Visit Reflection</b>
12	<b>Artist as Storyteller: Capturing the Mood</b> <b>K-5, 6-8, 9-12</b>
12-13	<b>Artist as Experimenter: Principle of Thirds</b> <b>K-5, 6-8, 9-12</b>
13	<b>Artist as Experimenter: Poetic Tribute</b> <b>6-8, 9-12</b>
14	<b>Artist as Storyteller: Imagination Isles</b>
15	<b>Bibliography &amp; Links</b>
16-17	<b>At the Museum</b>
18	<b>About the Whitney's Building</b> <b>Learning Standards</b>

## **Cover image:**

*American Gothic*, 1930. Oil on composition board, 30 3/4 x 25 3/4 in. (78 x 65.3 cm). Art Institute of Chicago; Friends of American Art Collection 1930.934. © Figge Art Museum, successors to the Estate of Nan Wood Graham/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, NY

# ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

## GRANT WOOD: AMERICAN GOTHIC AND OTHER FABLES

*Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables* features the full range of Grant Wood's work, including early Arts and Crafts decorative objects and Impressionist oils through his mature paintings, murals, drawings and book illustrations. The exhibition reveals a complex, sophisticated artist whose image as a farmer-painter was as mythical as the fables he depicted in his art.

Wood's romanticized depictions of a seemingly more innocent time elevated him into a popular, almost mythic national figure, celebrated for his art and his promotion of Regionalism, the representational style associated with the Midwest that dominated American art during the Great Depression. Wood sought pictorially to fashion a world of harmony and prosperity that would answer America's need for reassurance at a time of economic and social upheaval. Yet underneath its bucolic exterior, his art reflects the anxiety of being an artist and a deeply repressed gay man in the Midwest in the 1930s. By depicting his subconscious anxieties through populist images of rural America, Wood crafted images that speak both to American identity and to the estrangement and isolation of modern life.

Wood began his career as a decorative artist. Even after he shifted to fine arts, he retained the ideology and pictorial vocabulary of Arts and Crafts, a movement that promoted simplicity of design and truth to materials. To it, he owed his later use of flat, decorative patterns and sinuous, intertwined organic forms as well as his belief that art was a democratic enterprise that must be accessible to the average person, not just the elite.

Like many American artists of the time, Wood initially looked to Europe as the center of culture. He went abroad four times between 1920 and 1928 for a total of twenty-three months, primarily studying the work of the French Impressionists, whose loose brushwork he adopted in the first two decades of his career to paint what he later called "Europy-looking" subjects. His assimilation of the style served him well in Cedar Rapids. By the early 1920s, he had become the city's leading artist, selling his paintings to its residents and executing commissions in a variety of styles according to each project's needs.

By the late 1920s, Wood came to believe that the emergence of a rich American culture depended on artists breaking free of European influence and expressing the specific character of their own regions. For him, it was Iowa, whose rolling hills and harvested corn fields he used as the background for his earliest mature portraits.

## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION (CONTINUED)

Wood decided that his subjects would be “my neighbors in Cedar Rapids, their clothes, their homes, the patterns on their tablecloths and curtains, the tools they use. I suddenly saw all this commonplace stuff as material for art. Wonderful material!” In Europe, he had admired Northern Renaissance painting by artists such as Hans Memling and Albrecht Dürer. By the time he painted *American Gothic* in 1930, he had concluded that the hard-edge precision and meticulous detail in their art could be used to convey a distinctly American quality, especially suggestive of the Midwest. Joined with lowan subject matter, the technique became the basis of his signature style.

Wood felt that all painting, portraiture included, must suggest a narrative in order to engender the emotional and psychological engagement he associated with successful literature. Consequently, he included images that suggested something about the life and character of the depicted subject, taking care to avoid anecdotal illustration by painting archetypes rather than individuals. He left the “props” in his portraits intentionally ambiguous, making the stories they suggest so enigmatic that they defy ready explanation; they are puzzles to be deciphered by viewers based on their individual attitudes and experiences. As a result, Wood’s portraits have historically invited multiple interpretations.

This exhibition is organized by Barbara Haskell, Curator, with Sarah Humphreville, Senior Curatorial Assistant.

More information about the exhibition:

<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/GrantWood>



# PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES

Before visiting the Whitney, we recommend that you and your students explore and discuss some of the ideas and themes in the exhibition. We have included some selected images from the exhibition, along with relevant information that you may want to use before or after your Museum visit. You can print out the images or project them in your classroom.

## Pre-visit Objectives:

- Introduce students to the artist Grant Wood and works in the exhibition.
- Examine themes students may encounter on their museum visit.
- Explore how Wood depicted the world around him.

## 1. Artist as Storyteller: American Tale

- Grant Wood felt that in order for a painting to be accessible to everyone, it should have elements of a narrative or story. Ask students to look closely at *American Gothic* on page 7. What story do students think Wood was trying to tell with this painting? What details did he include to help support his story?
- In 1930, Wood visited the town of Eldon in southwest Iowa and saw a frame house with a large gothic window just below the roof. Wood used a sketch and a photograph to depict the house in the background of *American Gothic* and then imagined the people who might live there. Who do students think might live in that house today? If this painting was a portrait of those contemporary inhabitants, what kind of clothes would they be wearing? What objects might they hold? What might their expressions be?
- Have students find a house in their neighborhood that they are drawn to. Take a photograph. Imagine who might live there and draw a portrait of those people. Think about what they might wear and include objects to tell more about them.
- For older students: Grant Wood's painting, *American Gothic*, was first exhibited in 1930 at the Art Institute of Chicago. Wood had been a moderately successful local artist, working in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. More or less overnight his painting became an icon—a symbol of national identity. But there was a lot of disagreement about what exactly it symbolized. Ask students to use the resources below to research this period in American history. What were the predominant values and ideologies at the time of the Great Depression? Why do students think *American Gothic* became such an icon or symbol of national identity?

## Resources

<https://www.thebalance.com/effects-of-the-great-depression-4049299>

Overview of the Great Depression.

[http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp\\_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3452](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtid=2&psid=3452)

Popular culture during the Great Depression.

<http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/america-after-fall-painting-1930s>

Art Institute of Chicago, America After the Fall: Painting in the 1930s.

# PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

## 2. Artist as Observer: Ode to the Ordinary

When he returned to Iowa from his third trip to Paris in 1926, Grant Wood decided that the subjects of his art would be “my neighbors in Cedar Rapids, their clothes, their homes, the patterns on their tablecloths and curtains, the tools they use. I suddenly saw all this commonplace stuff as material for art. Wonderful material!”

Grant quoted in Haskell, Barbara. *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2018, 16.

- a. Ask your students to look at all of the images in this guide. Where do they notice patterns, textures, repetition, decorative elements, and details of Wood’s surroundings?
- b. What textures, patterns, and details do students notice around them in their classroom? For example, invite them to look closely at the wood grain on their desks, or the vents of a classroom radiator. Ask them to make sketches or descriptive lists of the “commonplace stuff” as “material for art” that they see around them in the classroom or at home.
- c. For older students: Why do students think Wood might have chosen to look at his rural Iowa community for inspiration? What do students think about that choice?

## 3. Artist as Experimenter: By Design

Like the Flemish and German Old Masters, Grant Wood conceived of his paintings as abstract patterns before thinking of them as representations. As he explained: I make a design of abstract shapes without any naturalistic details. Until I am satisfied with this abstract picture I don’t go ahead. When I think it’s a sound design, then I start very cautiously making it look like nature.”

Grant quoted in Haskell, Barbara. *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2018, 23.

- a. Use the images in this guide and this resource of 100 paintings by Grant Wood: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/grant-wood>. Ask younger students to look for circles, ovals, triangles, and rectangles in Wood’s work. Ask older students to look for more complex geometric shapes. Have students describe or draw the shapes that they think make up the basic composition of the selected works they look at.

# GRANT WOOD

## AMERICAN GOTHIC, 1930



*American Gothic*, 1930. Oil on composition board, 30  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 25  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (78 x 65.3 cm). Art Institute of Chicago; Friends of American Art Collection 1930.934. © Figue Art Museum, successors to the Estate of Nan Wood Graham/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photograph courtesy Art Institute of Chicago/Art Resource, NY

First exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago in October 1930, this painting captivated the public's imagination and catapulted Wood into the national spotlight overnight. A couple—modeled on Wood's sister, Nan, and his dentist—stand in front of a Midwestern house that is notable for its “gothic” window. Wood identified them as father and daughter, though the work was initially assumed to be a portrait of a husband and wife. “I simply invented some ‘American Gothic’ people to stand in front of a house of this type,” Wood later explained. From the painting's debut onward, its meaning has been the subject of endless speculation. What has remained central is its seeming embodiment of something stereotypically American.



# GRANT WOOD

## BOY MILKING COW, 1932



*Boy Milking Cow*, 1932. Oil on canvas, cut out and mounted on fiberboard, 71  $\frac{1}{4}$  x 63  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (181 x 160.7 cm) framed. Coe College, Permanent Art Collection, Cedar Rapids, Iowa; gift of the Eugene C. Eppley Foundation. © Figue Art Museum, successors to the Estate of Nan Wood Graham/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photograph by Mark Tade, 2005

Wood made his first murals in his mature, hard-edge style in 1932 to decorate the coffee shop of the Hotel Montrose in Cedar Rapids. Called *Fruits of Iowa*, the mural suite consisted of seven panels, three of which are on view in the exhibition. Wood once said that he got his best ideas while milking a cow. But while he took on the persona of “farmer painter” in public—even adopting overalls as a kind of uniform—Wood probably didn’t milk any cows. Most likely he meant that he found inspiration in what he saw around him in Iowa.

# GRANT WOOD

## THE MIDNIGHT RIDE OF PAUL REVERE, 1931



*The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*, 1931. Oil on composition board, 30 x 40 in. (76.2 x 101.6 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1950. © Figge Art Museum, successors to the Estate of Nan Wood Graham/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; courtesy Art Resource, NY

In this painting, Wood depicted the legend of Paul Revere riding a horse through a town square in Massachusetts in 1775 to warn the Americans of a British invasion. Wood borrowed a child's rocking horse to use as a model for Revere's horse. Although the work is based on historical subject matter, Wood did not attempt to depict the scene with factual accuracy. The houses are overly bright, as if lit by electric light, and the moonlight casts dramatic shadows. The "birds eye" viewpoint from above, stylized buildings, and eerie light create an otherworldly, dreamlike atmosphere.

# GRANT WOOD

## STONE CITY, 1930



*Stone City*, 1930. Oil on wood, 30 1/4 x 40 in. (76.8 x 101.6 cm). Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; gift of the Art Institute of Omaha 1930.35. © Figge Art Museum, successors to the Estate of Nan Wood Graham/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

*Stone City* is the first painting Wood executed in his mature hard-edged style. Depicting a hamlet outside Cedar Rapids that was once known for its thriving limestone quarry, Wood's painting is characterized by a precision that he felt expressed a specifically American quality. The work's aerial perspective and ornamental patterning reflect his study of nineteenth-century atlases and Currier and Ives prints, which enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in the 1930s. The profusion of stylized details gave the painting a decorative quality that reflected Wood's training in Arts and Crafts, but also caused it to be criticized for being too fanciful and mannered.



# GRANT WOOD

## IMAGINATION ISLES, 1924-25



Detail of *Imagination Isles*, 1924–25. Oil on canvas, 12 x 338 in. (30.5 x 858.5 cm). Cedar Rapids Community School District, Iowa; on loan to the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art, Iowa

Grant Wood taught at McKinley Junior High School from 1922 to 1925. As one of his class projects, he designed a frieze for the school cafeteria for his ninth grade students to paint. The class presented the work in a theatrical performance, unfurling it across the stage as one student read Wood's accompanying script, which celebrated the dream-like imagination of childhood. Both the subject matter and the work's flat decorative patterns and organic forms would reappear in Wood's mature painting.

With the same collaborative spirit in which the original was painted, students from the Whitney's partnership schools and Teen Programs—Lab Middle School for Collaborative Studies and the Lower Manhattan Arts Academy, Youth Insights Artists, Youth Insights Leaders, and students who attend Open Studio for Teens—recreated the frieze with the assistance of Whitney staff. The recreation of the frieze is on view in the exhibition, *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*.

*Grant Wood: Imagination Isles*

<http://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/36836>

A short video documents the painting process and includes interviews with the students in the Whitney's Teen Programs.

# POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES

## Post-visit Objectives

- Enable students to reflect upon and discuss some of the ideas and themes from the exhibition.
- Have students further explore some of the artists' ideas through discussion, art-making, and writing activities.

### 1. Museum Visit Reflection

After your museum visit, ask your students to take a few minutes to write about their experience. What new ideas did the exhibition give them? What other questions do they have? Ask students to share their thoughts with the class.

### 2. Artist as Storyteller: Capturing the Mood

- Ask younger students to look at the images in this guide or selected portraits in this resource of 100 paintings by Grant Wood: <https://www.wikiart.org/en/grant-wood>. Ask students to pick two images and discuss the mood or feeling they get from each artwork. Make a word wall. Have students consider how the colors, shapes, or expressions on people's faces might help create a mood in each image.
- For older students: Wood asserted that it is "the depth and intensity of an artist's experience that are the first importance." Great art begins "by looking inside ourselves, selecting our most genuine emotions." He believed that the first twelve years of childhood had the most impact on adult life, fusing "the materials of past experience. . .with present situations." Ask students to take another look at Wood's work. What can they find in Wood's paintings that represents this view?

### 3. Artist as Experimenter: Principle of Thirds

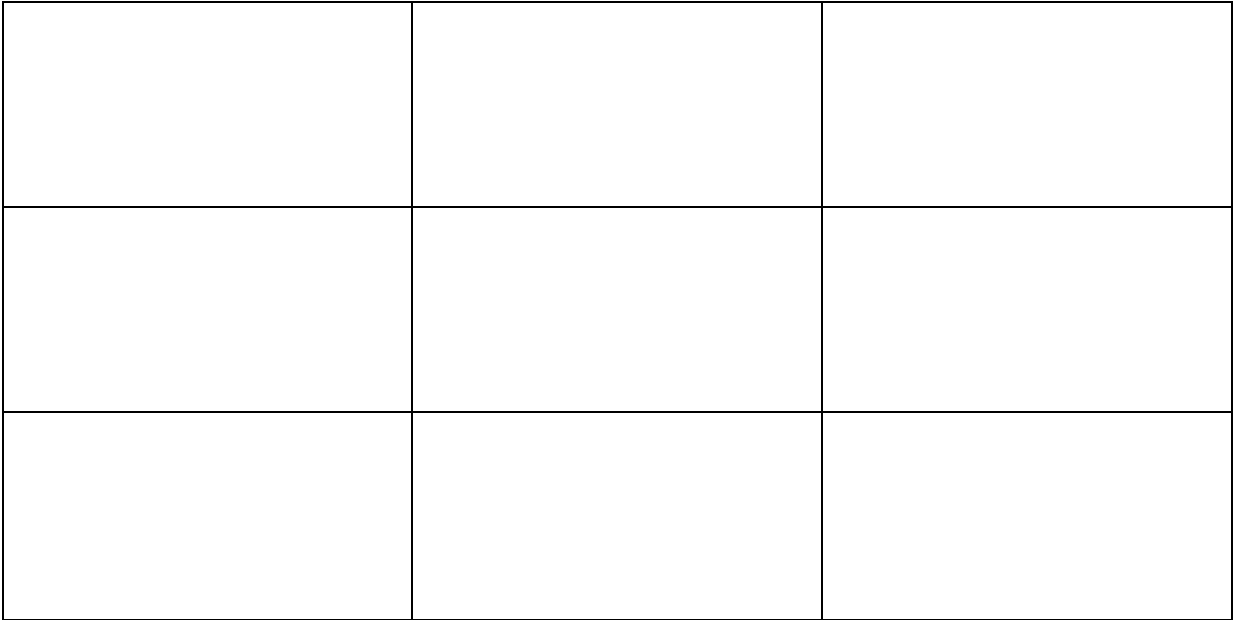
For his landscape compositions, Grant Wood used the "principle of thirds", also known as the "rule of thirds." First he drew a pencil grid of nine equal parts on top of the composition and adjusted the visual elements in the picture so that they landed more or less where the gridlines meet. Poet Paul Engle said of Wood: "He did not move mountains. There are no mountains in Iowa, but he did move hills to give a better artistic effect." Paul Engle in Ed Ferreter, *Jay Sigmund and Grant Wood*. <https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1107&context=bai>

- Look at these visual examples with your students to understand the Principle of Thirds. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule\\_of\\_thirds](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule_of_thirds)
- Have students explore the principle of thirds in Wood's paintings. Ask them to look at the images in this guide or at Wood's landscape paintings in this resource <https://www.wikiart.org/en/grant-wood>. Where do they see important elements of the composition lining up with, or close to the intersecting lines of their grids?



## POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

- c. Use the example of a grid template below. Have students make their own grid templates on acetate or clear plastic and use them as viewfinders to frame the world around them. Students could also create compositions of their own using their grid templates and drawing or painting materials.



### 4. Artist as Experimenter: Poetic Tribute

- a. Use this resource to read and discuss poems about the Grant Wood's work by the artist's friend, Jay Sigmund. <https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1107&context=bai>
- b. For older students: print Sigmund's poem titled *Grant Wood* on pages 32-33 of the online document. Give a copy of the poem to each student. Ask them to circle or underline words or phrases in the poem that they feel connect with Wood's paintings. Have students compare with each other to see if they chose any of the same words or phrases, and discuss why.
- c. Hand out six Post-Its to each student. Ask students to write one word on each Post-It. The words could be comprised of two nouns, two adjectives, and two verbs inspired by Wood's work. Ask students to create a collaborative poem, or in smaller groups, have students arrange their Post-Its to create their own poems about Grant Wood.
- d. Younger students could write three words each (a noun, an adjective, and a verb) and work as a class to create a poem about Grant Wood.

## POST-VISIT ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

### 5. Artist as Storyteller: Imagination Isles

When Wood was an art teacher at McKinley Junior High School in Cedar Rapids from 1922 to 1925, he designed *Imagination Isles*, a frieze—a long, narrow artwork—for his ninth-grade students to paint. In his script that he wrote for the unveiling of the frieze, Wood suggested that the islands were truly imaginary: “No human body can visit these islands. Only the spirit can come.”

- a. Divide students into small groups. Ask each group to draw or paint their own imaginary islands. Have them think about what they might want to include in their wildest imagination—for example, fantastical mountains, plants, trees, water, or buildings. When students have completed their drawings or paintings, display and discuss their work. What did students represent in their imaginary isles?

## BIBLIOGRAPHY AND LINKS

Haskell, Barbara. *Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables*. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2018.

This exhibition catalogue includes a major reconsideration of Wood by Barbara Haskell, an extensive narrative chronology, and essays by Glenn Adamson, Eric Banks, Emily Braun, Richard Meyer, and Shirley Reece-Hughes.

Evans, R. Tripp. *Grant Wood: A Life*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.

<http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/GrantWood>

Information about the exhibition.

<https://www.wikiart.org/en/grant-wood>

100 paintings by Grant Wood.

<https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1107&context=bai>

Grant Wood and poet Jay Sigmund.

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/paul-reveres-ride>

*Paul Revere's Ride*, poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

<http://collection.whitney.org/artists/by-letter/A>

The Whitney's collection.

<http://whitney.org/Education>

The Whitney's programs for teachers, teens, children, and families.

<http://whitney.org/ForTeachers>

The Whitney's online resources for K-12 teachers.

# AT THE MUSEUM

## **Guided Visits**

Guided visits are one hour and ten-minute thematic tours that build upon classroom learning. We introduce students to three to five works of art through careful looking, discussions, and activities that incorporate the artist's voice and process. Museum educators lead inquiry based conversations as well as sketching or writing activities in the galleries. To schedule a visit, please go to <http://whitney.org/Visit/GroupTours>.

## **Guided Visit Themes**

School Programs uses a thematic-based approach to teaching in the galleries. We created these themes in order to foster thoughtful connections between K-12 classroom learning and the art on view. When you schedule a guided visit, you will be able to choose one of the following themes.

### **Artist as Observer (K-12)**

How do artists represent the world around them? How do they choose to show people and places? This theme can address topics including New York City, community, landscape, and portraiture. This is a great thematic tour for first-time visitors as it incorporates visual literacy skills and introduces students to multiple ways of looking at and talking about art.

### **Artist as Storyteller (K-12)**

How do artists tell a story? What is their point of view? This theme addresses ELA concepts such as narrative, tone, character, and setting and is recommended for literacy and writing classes.

### **Artist as Experimenter (K-12)**

How do artists push boundaries and explore new concepts? This theme examines how artists experiment with materials, processes, and ideas. Younger students may look at how artists use formal elements such as line, shape, color, texture, and composition, or how they transform everyday objects. Older students may consider more conceptual questions, such as "What makes this art?" and "Why is this in a museum?"

### **Artist as Critic (6-12)**

How do artists respond to the social, political, and cultural climate of their time? What does their work tell us about American life and culture? How can art serve as a catalyst for change? Students examine how artists respond to the topics that shape history, politics, and contemporary culture. This thematic tour can address subjects such as current events, war, gender, race, politics, and activism.

# AT THE MUSEUM (CONTINUED)

## **Working with Museum Educators**

If you are scheduled for a Guided Visit, your museum educator will contact you in advance. Let them know what preparatory work you have done, how this connects to the rest of your curricula, and what you would like your visit to focus on. The more you tell them, the better they can prepare for your visit. Please also let them know if your students have any specific needs. High school groups can spend extra time in the galleries after their guided tours only on Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays when the Museum is open to the public.

All educators and students on Guided Visits receive a pass to the return to the Museum for free.

Discuss Museum rules with students before your visit. We have found that works of art are more accessible if students are provided with some structure or direction, and we recommend giving students a task to complete while in the galleries. You may want to create a worksheet, free-writing or poetry activity, or a sketching assignment. To schedule a visit, please go to <http://whitney.org/Visit/GroupTours>.

## **whitney.org/ForTeachers**

Check out our web resources especially for K-12 teachers! Here you can explore the Whitney's collection, try out an activity with your students, prepare for a Museum visit, and learn some tips for working with modern and contemporary art. For Teachers also includes discussion, research, art making and writing activities, downloadable teacher guides, and links to related websites.



## ABOUT THE WHITNEY’S BUILDING

The Whitney’s building opened on May 1, 2015 and was designed by architect Renzo Piano. His design was inspired by the industrial character of the neighboring buildings in the Meatpacking District. There’s art all over the Whitney: in the galleries, stairwell, first-floor lobby, and on the outdoor terraces, which offer awesome 360 degree views of the city. Artist Richard Artschwager designed the building’s four elevators. Titled *Six in Four*, the elevators are based on six themes that occupied Artschwager’s imagination from the mid-1970s throughout his artistic career: door, window, table, basket, mirror, rug. Each elevator is an immersive installation comprised of one or two of these themes.

### **The Laurie M. Tisch Education Center**

For the first time in its history, the Whitney has a dedicated space for education. The Laurie M. Tisch Education Center is a hub of activity where visitors of all ages can engage with artists and enliven and enrich their museum experience. Centrally located on the Museum’s third floor and adjacent to the Susan and John Hess Family Gallery and Theater, the Laurie M. Tisch Education Center brings visibility to the educational mission of the Whitney and also provides opportunities for museum educators to work in new ways, offering audiences drop-in programming, hands-on learning, as well as in-depth and interdisciplinary programming.

### **Feedback**

Please let us know what you think of these materials. Email us at [schoolprograms@whitney.org](mailto:schoolprograms@whitney.org). For more information about our programs and resources, please visit [whitney.org/Education](http://whitney.org/Education).

## LEARNING STANDARDS

The projects and activities in this teacher guide address national and state learning standards for the arts, English language arts, social studies, and technology.

The Partnership for Twenty-first Century Learning Skills

<http://www.p21.org/>

Common Core State Standards

<http://www.corestandards.org/>

Links to National Learning Standards

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

Comprehensive guide to National Learning Standards by content area

<http://www.education-world.com/standards/national/index.shtml>

New York State P-12 Common Core Learning Standards

<http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-p-12-common-core-learning-standards>

New York City Department of Education’s Blueprint for Teaching and Learning in the Arts

<http://schools.nyc.gov/offices/teachlearn/arts/blueprint.html>

# CREDITS

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