

# Art Adventure

## **Cultural Reflections in Art**



Clementine Hunter, *The Wash*, 1950–59

## ● **Become a member of the museum today!**

Thank you for participating in the Minneapolis Institute of Art's popular Art Adventure Program! By volunteering as a Picture Person, you build an important link between the museum and our region's schoolchildren.

By becoming a member of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, you can reach even further, bringing the experience of world-class art to thousands of museum visitors a year – some visiting for the first time ever, and many of them schoolchildren. Members help support the museum's free general admission every day. Members also help support the exhibitions, lectures, events, and classes offered for children, families, students, and adults.

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## ● **What are you doing next Family Day?**

Family Days at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts are free monthly events that highlight the museum's collection and special exhibitions for art lovers of all ages. The second Sunday each month, from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., the museum is filled with hands-on art activities, live music, dance performances, artist demonstrations, family tours, and more. All activities are free and appropriate for children of all ages. Visit our website, [www.artsmia.org](http://www.artsmia.org), for specific Family Day dates, themes, and descriptions.

# About the Art Adventure Program

## What's the Art Adventure Program?

The Art Adventure Program at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts is a way of bringing works of art that can't leave the museum into elementary school classrooms. Each of the ten Art Adventure reproduction sets features eight works of art chosen around a theme of particular interest to children. Students and teachers are encouraged to follow up classroom presentations with a class visit to the museum to see the actual artworks. They can take a tour with an Art Adventure Guide or with their teacher using a self-guide brochure available from the museum.

## What's a Picture Person?

Picture People are the volunteers from the school community who present the reproductions in the classrooms. They are the vital link between the original work of art in the museum and children in the schools. Before they visit any classrooms, Picture People come to the museum for a training session on the reproduction set their school will be using that year. At training they receive printed background material, learn presentation techniques, and—most importantly—experience the enjoyment of interacting with the original objects they will soon be introducing to students.

## What does a Picture Person Presentation consist of?

Each participating school structures its Picture Person presentations differently. A Picture Person may present pairs of images in a series of short visits; all the images at once in a single, longer visit; or some other schedule arranged by the school's Art Adventure Coordinator. The presentation may consist only of a discussion or it may involve hands-on activities. In addition, Picture People bring their own individual creativity to their presentations.

Whatever the format, however, one essential characteristic is constant: the Picture Person encourages the children first and foremost to **look** at the reproduction and **talk** about what they see. Although the Picture Person is knowledgeable about the works of art, she or he facilitates the discussion with thoughtful open-ended questions and related props rather than delivering "lecture"-style information.

## What does the Art Adventure Program do for kids?

Picture Person presentations provide students with a rare opportunity to spend time looking at art and express what they see in words. Students gain confidence in their ability to find meaning in artifacts from a wide range of world cultures. They practice seeing things from another person's point of view, whether it's their classmate's or the artist's. They feel the thrill of meeting an old friend when they later come upon familiar objects at the museum. And, not least, they enjoy meaningful contact with a visiting member of the school community.

# Preparing for a Picture Person Presentation

## **Relax!**

The information provided in this manual is intended as background material to help you feel comfortable when you present the images to children. You are not expected to convey all the details. On the contrary; choose two or three key ideas you think will be compelling for the age group to which you are presenting. Kids love stories—what might you “spin” into a tale? What parallels can you draw with their lives?

## **Be sure everyone is able to see the reproduction.**

Talk with the classroom teacher to find out what routines the class follows when gathering for a visitor. Young groups will often sit on the floor; older students may remain at their desks. Try for a setup that will get the students as close to the reproduction as possible. Keep the students’ eyes on you, too, by making regular eye contact throughout the group.

## **Establish a climate where students can listen to what each child has to say.**

It is very difficult to listen to more than one person at the same time. Let the kids know at the outset that you expect them to take turns speaking. (If you don’t know the children’s names already, arrange with the teacher to have them wear nametags so you can call on them by name.) Paraphrasing what is said emphasizes that you are really listening and encourages them to listen to one another. Your rephrasing may also help expand their vocabulary. Take care to remember, however, that aesthetic judgments are personal and inexact—set your own preferences aside to allow students to form their own opinions.

## **Begin your presentation of each image with a long moment of silent looking.**

Introduce the lesson by explaining who you are and that you have brought reproductions of real works of art from the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Review with the class what a museum is and what you’ll be doing with them. Then make a show out of getting the class to understand that their first job is to look quietly. You might build the suspense by keeping each image hidden while you explain that you do not want them even to raise their hands until you ask them to. Model your expectations by spending the time looking too.

**Give children time to talk about what they have discovered by looking.**

Good questions to use are "What's going on here?" and "What do you see that makes you say that?" Be sure to use your finger to point to the part of the picture the child is talking about. Paraphrase his or her words to clarify the observation for others. You'll be surprised how quickly students learn to justify their comments with evidence they can see in the picture, with a little prompting. "What else can you find?" can help generate further comments. See the "Tips for Talking about Art" following this section for more ideas.

**Connect your key ideas to the students' observations.**

When the student's observations begin to slow down, use what you have learned about their interests to steer the discussion towards the key ideas you have chosen to focus on. Try to ask questions that will draw connections between what they have said and what you would like them to consider. If they pose questions you can't answer, admit it! Brainstorm together ways to find an explanation.

**Keep the age of your audience in mind.**

A child's interests and understandings evolve through generally predictable stages of development. Plan your presentations accordingly. Don't expect young children to be able to focus for more than twenty minutes. Consider your class's ability to understand time—will students understand a date or phrase such as "colonial times" (fifth graders might) or should you stick with "a long time ago" or "about 100 years ago"? At the same time, try not to talk down to older students.

You can expect developmental differences in children's aesthetic approaches to art, as well. Younger children will accept abstraction, while older children tend to demand a high degree of realism. Remember, too, that it's hard for young viewers to look "through" subject matter to notice compositional devices until preadolescence. And it's surprising to us as adults that children generally do not notice the emotional overtones of a work until the middle years of childhood. (Find out more about the stages of aesthetic development in *Invented Worlds*, by Ellen Winner, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982.)

**Talk to other Picture People and use your own imagination!**

Veteran Picture People have great ideas about how to capture the imagination of a class. Don't hesitate to borrow and adapt their suggestions. In addition, several Art Adventure sets come with "prop kits," an assortment of supplementary materials for you to use in your presentation. Talk to your school's Art Adventure Coordinator to see if the set you are using comes with props.

# Tips for Talking about Art

Remember, a key goal of the Art Adventure program is to help beginning viewers create personal meaning in a work of art. While your impulse may be immediately to begin "teaching," more is gained in the long run if you take the time to help the children establish an emotional connection with the art. The questions below help kids find their own relevance in works of art, and thereby learn to value art as having something to do with their own lives.

**What's going on in this picture?  
What do you see that makes you say that?**

These simple questions work particularly well with artworks that have a narrative thread. You'll notice this question is different than, "What do you see?" Instead of eliciting a list of things in the picture, "What's going on?" invites a consideration of relationships and interactions and taps into children's natural interest in stories. The question, "What do you see that makes you say that?" focuses comments on the evidence at hand and helps kids explain their assumptions.

**How would you feel if you were "in" this work of art?**

What would you hear? How would something feel to touch? What path would you take through the picture? What do you see that makes you say that? Imagining the picture as an environment engages all the senses. The expressive qualities of a work become more concrete, easier to relate to.

**How is this object like something you encounter in *your* life?**

What would you use this for? What do you see that makes you say that? Do you have anything like it? Why do you like to have pictures of yourself? Why do you buy postcards on vacation? Drawing parallels with children's experiences gives them a hook on which to hang new information. Identifying similarities helps illuminate differences as well.

**What person or object in this picture do you think was most important to the artist?**

What are people in the picture looking at? What has a lot of details? Where are there bright colors? What is biggest? Talking about what makes things seem important in a work of art can allow even a novice to address basic compositional principles.

**How would the artwork seem different if you could make a change?**

What would happen if you changed a color? Made something bigger or smaller? Moved an object or person? Left something out? Added more details? Changed the quality of a line? Imagining changes helps identify visual elements and their contribution to the overall effect of the image.

**How is this work of art like or different from another one you've seen in this set?**

"Compare and contrast" is a staple of art historical thinking, but it can be done by anybody, at any level of thinking. Get together with your fellow volunteers to coordinate some provocative pairs.

**How does this work of art relate to the theme of the set?**

Let the students pull it all together! What connections do they see between the theme and what they've noticed and learned about the work of art?

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**Want to take it further?**

Have a look at *The Intelligent Eye: Learning to Think by Looking at Art*, by David N. Perkins (Santa Monica, Calif.: The J. Paul Getty Trust, 1994), a very readable guide on how and why to look carefully at art.

Another good book is *Take a Look: An Introduction to the Experience of Art*, by Rosemary Davidson (New York: Viking, 1994). Written for young readers, it provides a nice example of how to talk with children about art.

# Tips for Using Props

## Why props?

Students normally first encounter the Art Adventure works of art in their classrooms as 20 x 22-inch reproductions. In the reproductions, all the works of art appear to be two-dimensional and similar in size. Props accompany many of the reproductions to help overcome this limitation. Touching a material similar to the work of art, seeing the technique used to create it, or looking at a photograph in which the object is being used adds another dimension to the reproduction of the work of art. The use of props also helps engage learners who prefer hands-on learning styles, and reinforces the understandings of all learners.

## What are the challenges of props?

Be aware that props will do little but distract your group without careful planning. Consideration of the following points can prevent group management challenges from undermining the benefits of props:

- What understanding about the work of art does the prop best illustrate? Present the prop in conjunction with information about a work of art or to help answer a question about the work of art.
- How will you structure the group's interaction with the prop? There are a number of ways to use the prop. Among the variations:
  - Pass the prop around to each student. If you do it this way, give the students a question to consider while they are waiting for the prop and one to consider after they have held the prop. Encourage the students to be ready for discussion when the prop finishes circulating.
  - Ask a single student to come forward and describe how it feels to the whole group.
  - Hold the prop yourself and walk it around the group for the students to touch or look at closely. What should the students be doing while you're doing that?
  - Hold the prop yourself to illustrate relevant parts of the discussion. Then give everyone a chance to examine it more closely at the end of your presentation.
- How will you explain to the group what you expect them to do with the prop? Clear communication of your expectations is essential to getting the students to stay focused on the activity. Will they all get to touch the prop? How should they take turns? What should they do when it's not their turn? How should they treat the prop?
- How will you link the experience with the prop to the rest of the discussion? After the students have explored the prop in some fashion, refer to the experience as you continue the discussion.
- How will you get the prop back? Don't forget to plan how you'll get the props back! Schools are charged significant fees for missing or badly damaged props.



# ***Cultural Reflections in Art***

**Art Adventure Program  
An Educational Program of the  
Minneapolis Institute of Arts  
Revised 2014**

# ***Cultural Reflections in Art***

## **Prop Kit Contents**

<b>Work of Art</b>	<b>Prop</b>	<b>Replacement Cost</b>
Jean Clouet the Younger, <i>Princess Charlotte of France</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Samples of velvet and silk</li> </ul>	\$30
Chuck Close, <i>Frank</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Photograph of Frank with grid and proportionate enlargement</li> </ul>	\$10
Korea <i>Dragon Jar</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sample of porcelain</li> <li>● Images of the jar from the side and rear and the MIA's blue and white Korean jar</li> </ul>	\$25 \$10
Kongo, <i>Nail Figure (nkisi nkonde)</i>	No prop	
Chimu, <i>Ear Spools</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Scale model of ear spool</li> </ul>	\$30
Assyria, <i>Winged Genius</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sample of limestone</li> </ul>	\$10
Clementine Hunter, <i>The Wash</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sample oil painting on masonite</li> <li>● Photograph of the African House on the Melrose Plantation</li> </ul>	\$30 \$10
Italy, <i>Writing Desk</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Sample of gilded wood</li> </ul>	\$35

**Please make sure that you have enclosed all of the items on this list when you return the prop kit. You will be responsible for the cost of replacing any missing items. Thank you!**

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# Introduction

When we encounter works of art in a museum, we experience them in various ways. First, we may simply delight in their beauty and appreciate their aesthetic qualities—their color, line, shape, texture or pattern. We might also be fascinated by their subject matter and try to understand their meaning. Or we may study them to learn about their place in history and about the cultures of which they are a part. Since works of art are often created for a context other than the museum, we can better understand their meaning if we are aware of the context for which they were made. Each of the eight works of art in this set is a product of a specific place and time and in some way reflects the culture that produced it.

A culture can be defined as *the way of life of a group of humans living in a particular geographical area of the world at a particular moment in time*. Culture includes the art, beliefs, social and family customs, inventions, language, technology, and traditions of a people. The name of the science that studies and interprets human culture is anthropology, while the branch of anthropology that concentrates on past civilizations is archaeology. Anthropologists and archaeologists work like detectives, gathering evidence from the artwork, houses, tools, and artifacts of a culture. They carefully piece together the evidence and then suggest theories to explain their discoveries. While they use various scientific methods to collect information, they also rely on careful observation as a tool of discovery.


Like anthropologists, students can use their eyes as tools of discovery, looking for clues about the various cultures. By asking certain questions, they can collect a surprising amount of information and can make many deductions about the works of art and the cultures that produced them.

# Questions: Suggested Approaches

## Suggested Questions

The suggested questions are offered as guidelines and starting points only, and you may prefer to disregard them altogether. Use your own creativity and expertise to devise additional or alternative questions.

## General Thematic Questions & Points

- This unit takes the approach of the anthropologist and encourages students to carefully observe the objects, searching for clues to purpose and for information about the culture in which they were produced.
- Each entry contains a section titled **Cultural Clues** in which points are marked with a magnifying glass (  ). These are suggestions for discussion, but you may wish to develop your own sheet of cultural clues.
- **For each work of art you might ask:** What materials is the object made of? How was the object made? What does its size tell us? How might this object have been used? What does its overall appearance tell us? How might the people of this culture have responded to the object? These questions are developed further in the following clue sheet.
- From observations that students make, conclusions may be drawn about various aspects of the culture, such as its level of technology, natural environment, trade practices, and political, social, and religious beliefs.

## Approaches for Grades K–3

- Since the concept of culture may be difficult for very young children to understand, plan a discussion or activity about the meaning of culture *before* examining the works of art for cultural clues. Ask students about the customs and traditions of various cultures with which they are familiar, discussing aspects such as holidays, celebrations, food, clothing and language.
- When posing questions, encourage students to use their “tools” (their eyes) like an anthropologist or archaeologist and to search for clues about the culture. You may want to list all the things that your class discovers about the work of art and its culture.

# Cultural Reflections Clue Sheet

- Clue 1: Materials. What materials is the object made of? Are these natural materials or ones made by humans? If natural, are they accessible from the surroundings or are they obtained through trade?
- Clue 2: Technique. How were these materials put together? What level of technical skill or education would this construction require? Is it a simple process or a complex one? Could it be done by hand or would it involve several tools or people to complete it?
- Clue 3: Size. What does the size of the object tell us? Is it small or large? What special tools would be required to make something very small? Very large? If the object is small, must special care be taken to protect it? If very large, does it need a special place for its use? Does its size tell us anything about the way it might have been used?
- Clue 4: Function. How might this object have been used? Do you think it was made for practical use or for decoration? Why? Was it used for everyday or special occasions? Why do you think so?
- Clue 5: Appearance. What does the overall appearance of this object tell us? Does it look new or does it show signs of use or age? Does it depict recognizable subject matter? If so, has this subject been shown realistically or has its appearance been stylized? What details do you see? Do the details tell us anything about the meaning or use of the object?
- Clue 6: Effect. How might the people of the culture have responded to the object? Would they find it appealing? Scary? Does it represent something pleasant? Threatening? Does it appear to be impressive and important or ordinary? Would the people have treated it with respect and care, or casually?







Jean Clouet the Younger, French, 1475-1541

***Princess Charlotte of France***, c. 1522

Oil on cradled panel

H.7 x W.5½ inches x D.<sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches (panel)

Bequest of John R. Van Derlip in memory of Ethel Morrison Van Derlip, 35.7.98

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## Theme

This painting is filled with clues to what it was like to be a young princess living in France during the 16th century. It also offers evidence about the artist's occupation as a portraitist during that period.

## Background

Francis I, king of France from 1515 to 1547, was an ardent collector of art. He was also the first French king to favor painting over the other arts. Patronizing the Italian Renaissance masters at the height of their creativity, Francis I set the style for all the arts in France, placing a new emphasis on ceremony and luxury.

Except for pictures of royalty, few painted portraits were produced in France before the 16th century. As the court and nobility developed under Francis I, aristocratic families began to build their own collections of portraits, emulating the king and demonstrating their wealth and position. Another reason for the growing popularity of portraiture was the rise of Renaissance humanism and the interest in the individual. By the time Jean Clouet (Jhahn Klew-AY) began his career, the demand for portraits had increased greatly.<sup>1</sup>

## ***Princess Charlotte***

In this portrait, Princess Charlotte, daughter of Francis I, is shown as she appeared when about six or seven years old. This is the only likeness of Charlotte. She died not long after it was painted, at the age of only seven years, eight months.

Charlotte fills the frame, with her face shown in three-quarter view and her upper torso at a slight angle. She is presented in all her finery, holding a rosary of black and gold beads. Although only six years old, she is dressed like adult women in France during the 16th century. Over a linen chemise (or undergarment), Charlotte wears a golden silk tunic (outer garment), which is covered with a black velvet over-gown. On her head she wears a coral cap called a chaperon (shapp-err-OWN), made of velvet or quilted silk and decorated with tiny pearls. Underneath the cap is a thin linen or gauze layer that fastens around her chin. Clouet depicts the rich textures of her clothing and jewelry with meticulous attention to details such as the folds and pleats in her gold sleeves, the intricate lace of her linen cuffs and embroidered neckline, and the lustrous pearls in her headdress.

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Mellen, *Jean Clouet: Complete Edition of the Drawings, Miniatures, and Paintings* (London: Phaidon, 1971), 19.

Clouet captures the delicate quality of Charlotte's youthful skin, but her facial features seem older than six years. She gazes intently into the distance, with an expression of gentle reserve. While her quiet, contemplative mood contributes to her mature appearance, it reveals little about her thoughts or feelings.

Despite the painting's small scale, Princess Charlotte has a strong presence, enhanced by Clouet's handling of composition, color, and texture. Charlotte projects forward from the dark background, creating an illusion of a solid three-dimensional figure. Volume is given to the figure and costume, as seen in Charlotte's face and in the folds of the sleeves, where gradations of light and dark colors create the appearance of shadows and highlights. Clouet's use of shades of yellow, red, and brown gives Charlotte a warmth and vibrancy, which are reinforced by the enamel-like finish of his jewel tones. Charlotte's face and hands stand out against the dark background and broad areas of color. The exquisite details of her jewelry and costume are emphasized by their contrast with these masses of color.

As the eldest of Francis's six children, Charlotte would have been an important person in the French court despite her young age. In this period, French children, once they reached the age of six, were considered miniature adults, and they were expected to dress and act like adults. Because of Charlotte's high position in the court, expectations of appropriate behavior and manners would have been even greater. One can't imagine her telling jokes to her siblings, playing hide-and-seek, or sneaking a midnight snack from the kitchen.

## Technique

Using oil paints on a wooden panel, Clouet applied his colors with great precision, making the individual brushstrokes almost impossible to distinguish. The medium of oil paint lends itself both to minute detail and to the subtle blending of tones. Clouet probably began by sketching Charlotte's features on the white surface of a gessoed panel (gesso is a mixture made of fine ground plaster and glue). He then applied the flesh tones to the face and hands and added darker tones to build up the modeling. He probably painted the costume and background before adding the final details of jewelry and accessories.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mellen, 46–47.

## Artist

Little is known of Clouet's early years. It is thought that he was born in the southern Netherlands and by 1509 had settled in Paris. From 1516 on, he worked at the French court, and in 1530 he became chief painter to King Francis I, serving in this position for most of the king's reign. Clouet painted many portraits of royalty and nobility, including Francis I and other members of the royal family. Because Clouet's works are unsigned, attribution is often difficult. Yet he is considered to be an important artist who continued the French portrait tradition while borrowing elements from both Italian and Flemish art.

An innovator in many areas, Clouet originated the widespread use of portrait drawings in colored chalk, a means of supplying copies of portraits in demand. He also created the format of the miniature portrait and helped introduce the concepts of Italian Renaissance art to France. His work had considerable influence on his contemporaries.

## Cultural Clues

-  The portrait allows us to imagine what royal life was like in 16th-century France. Charlotte's rich and sumptuous attire shows us how a princess would dress and also suggests that young children were expected to behave like adults.
-  Because Charlotte holds a rosary, we might conclude that religion was an important aspect of her life. Childhood death was not uncommon during this period, and we can consider how that possibility affected people's attitudes.
-  From its small size, we can deduce that the portrait probably was not hung in the ballroom or dining room of the royal palace but, rather, was painted for another family member to hang in a bedroom or sitting room, perhaps with portraits of Charlotte's brothers and sisters or other family members. It was probably for personal rather than state use.
-  The materials Clouet chose to use, panel and oil, were what was available at the time. Canvas had not yet replaced wood as the favored support for paint.
-  Clouet's naturalistic style using modeling to create an illusion of three-dimensionality suggests the technique of perspective.
-  Clouet's role as a painter of portraits suggests that he could support himself by specializing in this art form.

## Suggested Questions

1. Describe what Charlotte is wearing. What color is her hat? What color are the sleeves of her dress? What color is the bodice of her dress? What material do you think her dress is made of? How would it feel if you could touch it?
2. What can you tell about Charlotte's life by looking at her clothes? Do you think all children living when Charlotte lived wore clothes like hers? Do you think they all wore jewels?
3. What color is Charlotte's hair? Her eyes? Do you think Clouet has done a good job of recording her appearance? Why?
4. Can you tell what Charlotte is holding in her hands? What does this tell you about her religion?
5. How old do you think Charlotte is? What makes her look older than six years of age? (*Her facial features and serious expression; the adulthood of her costume; the rosary's suggestion of prayer; the way her image fills the entire panel.*)
6. Do you think Clouet painted this portrait in a hurry or over a period of time? Why? Do you think it was difficult to paint all the details of Charlotte's clothing?
7. Do you think Charlotte wanted to have her portrait painted? Why? What do you think she was feeling or thinking at this time? Do you think the artist was more interested in showing Charlotte's appearance or her feelings? Why do you think so?
8. Clouet painted Charlotte's portrait on a wood panel. Notice its actual size and how smooth the surface is. If the artist had painted on stretched canvas, do you think the portrait's appearance could have been different? (*Perhaps larger, probably rougher texture.*) Can you think of any reason why the artist chose a small panel of wood to paint on rather than a larger one? (*Easier to get small piece than large; small piece less likely to crack or split over time; small piece may have tighter, finer grain for smoother surface.*)
9. Look again at the actual size of this portrait. Do you think it was meant to be viewed from far away or close up? How can you tell?
10. We know that Charlotte died about a year after this painting was completed. What, if anything, does this tell us about childhood disease during her lifetime?
11. Today we can use cameras, but in the 16th century, portraits were the only way to record what a person looked like. Have you ever had your portrait done? Was it painted or photographed? Describe what you would wear to have your portrait painted. Would you like Jean Clouet to paint your portrait? If you needed to decide between Jean Clouet or Chuck Close to paint your portrait, which one would you choose? Why?





Chuck Close, American, born 1940  
**Frank**, 1969  
Acrylic on canvas  
H.108 x W.84 inches x D.3  
The John R. Van Derlip Fund, 69.137

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## Theme

This monumental portrait contains clues to American culture in the 1960s, offering evidence of the technology, the environment, and the social and artistic values of the period. Yet the subject of the painting, though depicted with a wealth of realistic detail, remains somewhat of a mystery.

## Background

Ever since the camera was invented in 1839, artists have often used photographs in producing works of art. Nineteenth-century European painters such as Eugène Delacroix and Gustave Courbet studied photographs to achieve an accurate view of nature, and the French Impressionists were inspired by the cropped compositions and unusual viewpoints found in photographs. Although photography has long been recognized as an independent art form, many painters still use the photograph as a source for their works.

Chuck Close's early portraits, based on photographic images, are associated with a group of artists called Photo-realists, who used photographs as subject matter for their paintings. This movement appeared in America in the late 1960s. It was both an outgrowth of the Pop movement, which used elements of popular culture as the basis for its art, and a reaction against Abstract Expressionism, a movement of the 1950s that emphasized emotional expression. Like other art of this era, Close's paintings are in large part about the process of creating art.

## Frank

In contrast to the small-scale portrait of Princess Charlotte, this portrait is monumental—9 feet by 7 feet. Based on a professional black-and-white photograph, it is more a portrait of that photograph than of the artist's friend Frank. Close believed that a photograph taken in a fraction of a second could reveal some truth about a person that could be lost in the lengthy sittings required by a traditional portrait painter. While he was interested in the unique qualities of his subjects, he did not emphasize their personalities. Close hoped that by choosing relatively anonymous subjects, he could create works that viewers would experience more as paintings than as portraits.

This appears to be a brutally realistic portrait of a young man pictured close up and directly from the front. Frank stares out at the viewer from behind his horn-rimmed glasses, which reflect the warped image of a cityscape in their lenses. Close painstakingly copied every contour and shadow of the photograph of Frank, giving the same attention to each detail, from his tousled hair, bushy eyebrows, and tightly closed lips to his facial pores. Close wanted to explore the relationship of the various parts of Frank's face. Depending on how one reads the surface of

the painting, a viewer can perceive the details either as parts of a face or as abstract shapes and patterns of black, gray, and white.<sup>3</sup>

Close's paintings address some intriguing aspects of visual perception through his meticulous translation of the camera's image. Like the human eye, the camera focuses on one area at a time, leaving other areas blurred. Close shows us the areas of blur, which our vision does not normally recognize since the lens in the human eye automatically provides a constantly adapting focus for the images we see. Here the tip of Frank's nose and the edges of his hair, ears, beard, and collar are slightly out of focus, just as they appeared in the photograph. Only that area between his nose and ears, which includes his glasses, eyes and parts of his cheeks, is in sharp focus.

Confronting *Frank* becomes both a riveting and a perplexing experience. His vast scale, wealth of realistic detail, and fixed, hypnotic stare can be unsettling to the viewer. Despite our efforts to understand who Frank is and what he is thinking, we are kept at a distance. Ultimately, we are concerned not so much about the subject but about the image itself and how and why it was made.

## Technique

After beginning his career as an abstract painter, Close decided to change his approach to painting and to work within a new format because he did not want to be concerned with decisions about composition (the way shapes and colors are arranged in a picture). He limited his subjects to portraits based on photographs, painting only familiar faces—those of his friends and family. He presented a frontal, close-up, symmetrical view of his subject's head and shoulders against a uniform white background. Also, he worked in very large scale because he wanted to create powerful images that would attract attention.

Close began by having a photograph made of his subject, working with a professional photographer in setting up the shots. He sought a passport-style effect, with a certain blandness of expression and banal quality. The photos were not intended to flatter the subject but to present interesting painting problems to the artist.

To translate the photograph into a monumental painting, Close used the techniques of Renaissance artists and contemporary billboard painters. He prepared a grid over the 8-by-10-inch photograph in order to transfer the image, unit by unit, to a proportionate grid drawn on the 9-by-7-foot canvas, which he covered with a white mixture of plaster and glue called gesso. He then created the image with a commercial airbrush, which expels paint by means of a compressor. Close's airbrush was filled with a thin mixture of black acrylic paint and water. He worked from top to bottom and, over the course of several months, applied many layers of paint to build up the dark tones. While he used some white paint, many of the white highlights and some small details, such as the hairs of Frank's beard, were made by scratching through the layers of black and gray with a razor blade to reveal the white gesso underneath. Close used no more than two tablespoons of black paint to create *Frank*. (Note: The reproduction used in this set appears more brown than black in tone than the actual painting.)

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<sup>3</sup>Martin Friedman in Lisa Lyons and Martin Friedman, *Close Portraits* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1980), 13.








## Artist

Chuck Close was born in 1940 in Monroe, Washington. From the age of four, he knew he was going to be an artist. School was difficult for him because of learning disabilities, but he discovered that he excelled in drawing. After graduating from high school, Close earned his B.A. degree from the University of Washington and his B.F.A. and M.F.A. degrees from Yale University. He also received a Fulbright Grant to study in Vienna, Austria, in 1964 and 1965. In 1967, Close moved to New York City and taught at the School of Visual Arts.

Close's formal education occurred when Abstract Expressionism was the dominant style of painting. Though skillful at painting abstract works, Close was frustrated by the open-ended nature of abstraction. In 1967 he began to use the photograph as a point of departure for large-scale portrait heads. Later he explored each of his subjects in a wide variety of media and techniques, including water colors, pastels, and ink "mosaics," made with impressions of the artist's thumbprints. While he is best known for his monumental portraits done with an airbrush, his works since the late 1970s have often been painted with brushstrokes, producing a looser, more spontaneous effect.

In the late 1960s Close began receiving critical recognition and by the mid-1970s was established as a major artist of the 20th century, represented in museums and galleries throughout the United States and Europe. In 1988, at the age of 48, Close suffered a spinal artery collapse that left him a quadriplegic. With months of therapy, extraordinary perseverance, and the use of special equipment, he was able to return to work in his New York City studio. Since then, he has continued to explore monumental portraiture, retaining some elements of his earlier format but incorporating brilliant pulsating colors and rich light and shadows.

## Cultural Clues

-  This portrait offers clues to life in America during the 1960s. The reflection in Frank's glasses reveals that his environment is the city with its tall buildings crowding the skyline. We can deduce that Frank lives in a heavily populated area.
-  We see the advanced technology of the period in the tall buildings that are reflected in Frank's glasses. The plastic and glass from which Frank's glasses are made also suggest sophisticated technology.
-  The advanced technology of the airbrush technique is apparent in the mechanical quality of the image and the smooth surface of the canvas. Because the painting imitates the look of a photograph, we can assume knowledge of and interest in photography.
-  The monumental scale of the portrait suggests that it was intended to hang in a very large space, perhaps an office-building lobby or a museum. It certainly seems too large for use in a home.
-  Frank's casual attire suggests that formality was not an important custom in this culture as it was to Charlotte and her culture.



The artist was not commissioned by his subject as Jean Clouet was commissioned by Charlotte's family. Rather, Close chose to paint Frank's image because he wanted to express himself as an artist. We can deduce that the artist's role is different in 20th-century America than in 16th-century France.

## Suggested Questions

1. Describe the glasses he is wearing. Are there lenses in the glasses? How can you tell? What do you see in the reflection of his glasses? What does this tell you about where he lives?
2. If you were to meet Frank, what do you think he would be like? Why?
3. Is this a photograph or a painting? How can you tell? What makes it look like a photograph? (*It is black and white; some parts look out of focus; it looks so real.*)
4. **Show a picture of a person standing next to the painting.** Would this painting fit in your bedroom? Why do you think Chuck Close decided to paint this portrait so large? (*To attract attention; so that the viewer can see it from far away.*)
5. Look at Frank's hair. Can you see all the little strands of hair? Where can you see them most clearly? (*Top of head, beard, eyelashes of right eye*). Where can you see the pores of his skin most clearly? (*On cheeks; above eyebrows.*) Look at a friend's hair; can you see all the strands of his or her hair, or are some parts hard to see? Are there some places where it is harder to see them? Why do you think Chuck Close included so many details? (*To make it look real, like a photograph.*)
6. What tools do you think Chuck Close used to make this painting look so real? **It would be helpful if volunteers could show the students a real airbrush or a picture of an airbrush.**
7. If you could interview Frank, what would you ask him? What do you think you would learn about him? Would you like to know Frank?
8. Pretend you are an anthropologist living in the year 2100 and you discover this painting of Frank. What clues do you see that tell you something about Frank's culture—America in the 1960s? (*The advanced technology of the airbrush technique; the view of the city reflected in Frank's glasses.*)
9. Would you like Chuck Close to paint your portrait? Why or why not?
10. Compare the size of the Close portrait to that of the Clouet. Do you think Close could have worked on this scale if he had had only wood to paint on? Why or why not? (*Probably not. Very few trees could yield a single sheet of wood 9 feet by 7 feet.*)
11. What does the size suggest about its use? Where do you think it was meant to be exhibited? Was it meant to be used in a bedroom or living room? Or was it meant for a large, perhaps public area, such as a museum, office building lobby, or artist's studio?





Korea (Asia)

***Dragon Jar***, 18<sup>th</sup> Century

Porcelain with underglaze iron decor

16 ¼ inches

Gift of Louis W. Hill, Jr., 81.113.6

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## **Theme**

Dragon jars, so named for their motifs or decorations, were made in Korea during the Choson (“JO-sohn”) dynasty. Dragon jars are thought to bring good fortune to their owners, a belief that originated in China. Korea has long been influenced by China, its large and powerful neighbor to the west. Yet this small peninsular country has developed and kept its own artistic character.

## **Background**

Korean ceramics have long been admired, collected, and imitated throughout Asia and the West. Despite evolving aesthetic preferences, changing technologies, and strong influences from China and Japan (brought about through foreign trade, invasion, and occupation), Korean ceramics have retained their unique character. They can be distinguished from those of Japan and China by their spontaneity and subtlety, distinctive interpretation of the natural world, and creative infusion of and adaptation to outside influences.

Korean ceramics function as ceremonial, funerary, and household objects. The finest, most decorative ceramic vessels were used in ceremonies and/or burials, while less elaborate vessels were made for everyday use. Many of the oldest, best preserved examples were buried in tombs and thus protected from the elements.

During the Choson dynasty (1392–1910) Korea’s rulers practiced Confucianism, a religious ideology that emphasizes living simply and humbly. The changes in political, spiritual, and social attitudes during this period are reflected in the ceramics. During the early centuries of the Choson dynasty, porcelain vessels were commonly left undecorated—often referred to as “white ware”—as an expression of Confucian modesty. By the mid-15th century, however, white porcelains were painted with brownish-red copper-and-iron oxide, as well as cobalt blue underglazes. These vessels, with their vigorous painting styles and whimsical designs, are uniquely Korean.

## ***Dragon Jar***

Symbols of good fortune and power, dragons were a favorite decoration on Korean ceramics. Though inspired by Chinese designs, Korean dragons are much more playful than those made in neighboring countries. The brushstrokes on this dragon jar make it appear lighthearted, even humorous. Yet the artist also depicted the dragon’s power, giving it a long snout, sharp teeth, fierce eyes, and hair standing on end.

The artist who decorated this dragon jar painted the creature’s entire body covering the surface. The dragon wrapped around this jar is shown swooshing through the sky, surrounded by wispy clouds. Dragons were said to control the weather and bring rain—a good omen for a plentiful harvest.

Originally, dragon jars were reserved for ceremonies and to decorate royal households; they later came into wider use. The number of claws on a dragon's foot often reveals something about the person for whom the jar was made. Five-clawed dragons, which represented the emperor in China or the king in Korea, were owned only by royalty. This dragon's feet, concealed by its snout and a cloud, suggest that the jar belonged to a common household.

Fun fact: The American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) once owned this jar. It decorated his suite at the Plaza Hotel in New York.

## Technique

Produced on the Korean peninsula since the Koryo dynasty (918–1392), porcelain production flourished during the Choson dynasty. Originating in China, porcelain is a type of ceramic created by combining *kaolin*, a fine white clay that retains its shape even in very high temperatures, and *petuntse*, a stone that gives porcelain its translucent quality. The proper mixture of kaolin and petuntse is then combined with water to make a substance to be shaped on a potter's wheel, by hand, or in a mold.

Underglazing describes the surface application of mineral pigments (typically by brush) over which a clear glaze is applied and fired, keeping visible the mineral pigments beneath. Because of the intense heat at which porcelain is fired, only three coloring oxides can be used: iron, copper, and cobalt. The underglaze is painted directly onto unfired porcelain, which absorbs the color and keeps it from running. After application of a clear glaze, the vessel is fired at temperatures exceeding 2,100° F.

The MIA's collection contains two dragon jars: this one, painted with an iron oxide that accounts for the dragon's brown color, and a second painted with cobalt oxide, which creates a blue dragon. During the middle of the Choson dynasty, a shortage of cobalt oxide, a commodity imported from the Middle East, made it a precious, and costly, mineral. In response, Korean potters turned to the more plentiful iron oxide to paint their jars and vessels, displaying a remarkable freedom in their brown-and-white designs.

## Artist

Korean art of the late Choson dynasty is known for its whimsical style, especially when painted with iron and copper oxides. The maker of this porcelain jar depicted a dragon with a humorously long snout, bushy eyebrows, and large, baleful eyes. Long whiskers trail from its snout, and hair stands in spikes from its head. Quick dabs of iron oxide suggest scales and bumpy skin. Because porcelain rapidly absorbs oxides, the painter must have been confident and quick with the brush.

## Cultural Clues

- The frequent use of dragons to decorate jars indicates an important motif. In Korean culture, dragons were a symbol of good fortune and power.
- The dragon's body wraps itself around this jar, swooshing through the sky surrounded by clouds. Dragons were said to control the weather and bring rain for a plentiful harvest. The artist indicates the dragon's symbolic role by depicting it flying the cloud-filled skies.
- The use of the less expensive iron-oxide (brown) glaze instead of the more costly cobalt-oxide (blue) glaze indicates that this jar was likely made for someone of more modest means, not royalty or the court.
- Reserved for royalty, the five-clawed dragon was forbidden for use by commoners. This jar lacks a depiction of dragon claws, leading to a conclusion that it belonged to a common household.
- The playful brushwork and expressive nature of the dragon motif suggest that the artist was very skilled and at ease with applying the iron-oxide glaze to the jar's absorbent clay surface.
- During the Choson dynasty (1392–1910), Confucianism was the official religion. Confucianism emphasizes living a simple, humble life. With its carefree, whimsical design and simple shape, this jar reflects the Confucian virtues of humility and simplicity.
- Dragon jars were first made in China, reaching Korea through trade. China greatly influenced Korean ceramists, who adopted Chinese technologies and techniques, and then adapted them to their own aesthetic tastes.

## Suggested Questions

1. What kind of creature did the artist paint on this jar? What clues tell you this is a dragon? How is this dragon similar or different from dragons you've seen before?
2. How would you describe this dragon, especially its face?
3. Is it frightening? Or friendly? Why do you say that? What words would you use to describe this dragon?
4. Why do you think the artist decided to put a dragon on this jar? If this was your vessel, what creature would you want painted on it? Why? What would you store in your jar?
5. Unlike the vicious, fire-breathing dragons of Western mythology, Korean belief holds that dragons defeat evil, bring rain for bountiful harvests, deliver good fortune, and symbolize the authority of the ruler and the balance of nature. Dragons were a popular decorative motif during the Choson dynasty. What does this tell you about Korean culture of the time?
6. Compare and contrast this brown dragon with the MIA's blue dragon (see laminate prop).







Kongo (Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central Africa region)

***Nkisi Nkondi* (Nail Figure)**, 19th century

Wood, natural fibers, and metal

H.15¾ x W.9¾ x D.7¼ inches

The Christina N. and Swan J. Turnblad Memorial Fund, 71.3

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## Theme

Created to maintain the well-being of a Kongo village, this sculpture offers clues to the ways in which it was used and perceived by the inhabitants of that community.

## Background

This sculpture, called an *nkisi nkondi*, (en-KEE-see en-KAHN-dee) was carved by the Kongo people who lived in the region of Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo) in central Africa during the late 19th century. Popularly known as nail figures, these sculptures were used for various purposes, such as protecting the village, curing illnesses, settling disputes, sealing agreements, and destroying enemies.

The term *nkisi* refers to the spiritual charm of the figure. *Nkondi* refers to the figure itself and is derived from the verb *konda*, “to hunt.” (The plural form is *minkondi*.) Like seasoned hunters, *minkondi* could capture liars, thieves, and others who undermine society.

Generally carved in the shape of human beings or, on occasion, dogs, *minkondi* were sacred objects. A nail figure's power came from spirits that were attracted to ritual substances placed in a cavity cut into the figure's head or stomach. A religious specialist, who was also a healer and a legal expert, determined the nature of these substances, which could include herbs, animal bones, fur, and seeds.

With the assistance of this powerful carved figure, the religious specialist took care of the spiritual and physical needs of the Kongo villagers. Kept in a secluded part of the specialist's home, on special occasions the *nkisi nkondi* was brought outside in a public setting where judicial procedures took place. The parties involved came before the figure with the specialist, and together they investigated the problem at hand.

Each of the blades, nails, screws, and other sharply pointed objects driven into a nail figure represents the taking of an oath, the witnessing of an agreement, or some other occasion when the power of the figure was invoked. When an agreement was to be made between two individuals or two villages, representatives from both parties took an oath in front of the *nkisi nkondi* and then sealed the oath by driving a nail or other sharp metal object into the figure to activate its power. This was similar to the Western tradition of signing a contract. If two warring parties came before the figure to make peace, the conditions agreed upon were hammered into it with a nail. If a person accused another of stealing property, both would go before the *nkisi nkondi* and, while driving in a nail, would ask to be destroyed by the image if telling a lie.

Evoking both benign and fearsome powers, *minkondi* were considered to be executors of a system of justice as well as guardians and friends: they healed or protected the innocent,

punished or killed the guilty, and wrought revenge on those who broke their oaths. Some *nkisi* have been so heavily used that the wooden figure is barely visible beneath the applied objects.

### ***Nkisi Nkondi (Nail Figure)***

Despite its small size, this figure seems very imposing with nails and blades studding its surface. The head is finely carved with large, almond-shaped eyes, a broad nose with flaring nostrils, and a tense, open mouth. This mouth is ready to speak on behalf of justice, signifying that the figure is alert and has power. The eyes are made of glass mirrors. Like a mirror glass, through which one can see, but which also casts back a reflection, the eyes embody the notion of passing back and forth between the spirit and human worlds.

The asexual figure stands in a pose of challenge and authority, with its left hand resting on its hip, and its right arm raised to hold a weapon (which is missing). Yet it appears stable. The form is nearly symmetrical with its feet firmly grounded on two rectangular wooden bases. It is in a stance of readiness, poised for action—another reminder of the *nkisi nkondi's* power to punish clients who break their vows or tell lies before the image. A mirror covers the figure's stomach, sealing the rectangular container that holds substances believed to have strong religious powers. This mirror once reflected the faces of those that stood before the figure, showing that the spirit was keeping watch on their every move.

The figure is covered with a variety of sharp objects, mostly iron nails, which have particular significance since the Kongo people considered metal powerful. Also attached to the figure are shells, string, and pieces of bone as well as bundles filled with extra substances, such as the cotton-covered yoke around the neck. The tied bundles, held together by raffia cords, may symbolically represent the tying up or hindering of an evil spirit causing some affliction. Nails wrapped with string or wicker, such as those found on both the left and the right sides of the face, were probably used during a rite of reconciliation, binding the participants to their promises.

The animated and encrusted surface of sharp objects has a prickly texture that attracts and repels the viewer with its bristling energy. The variety and density of materials and textures hold our attention. Yet the aggressive nature of the attached nails and blades tends to distance the viewer from the figure. We know it would be uncomfortable to touch. At 15¾ inches tall, this nail figure could be easily transported from place to place, but some *minkondi* are as tall as 5 feet.





### **Technique**

This *nkisi nkondi* was carved out of wood. Woodcarving is a subtractive technique in which the form is created by chipping away the material, rather than by adding and modeling as with clay. Woodcarving tools include an assortment of chisels, gouges, and knives, which are struck with a mallet to form the sculpture. The face of this figure is finely carved with attention to naturalistic details in the features, while the body is roughly executed. After the sculptor carved the figure, a ritual specialist completed it by placing substances in the abdominal cavity and in other receptacles. The nails, blades, and screws were driven into the figure during its use. The sculpture is thus an assemblage of various materials, put together by several people.

## Artist

Although we do not know the names of the individuals who created this sculpture, we do know that *minkondi* were made by a sculptor and a ritual specialist working together.<sup>4</sup> These artists were qualified to meet the spiritual and social needs of the community.

## Cultural Clues

-  Because of its powerful appearance, we can guess that this figure was treated with respect by the village that owned it. The aggressive quality of the figure and materials probably intimidated those who confronted it. We can deduce that it had an important presence in a community.
-  Its appearance suggests signs of use on many occasions, since many objects were driven into the surface.
-  This figure was constructed of materials from the natural environment such as wood and raffia, and also human-made materials such as glass mirrors and metal nails and blades. These people either had metal forging skills or acquired metal objects through trade with other people.
-  The figure's small size suggests that it could be easily transported.

## Suggested Questions

1. Does this wooden sculpture look like a human being? What makes it look human? Some parts of it do not look human. What parts are these?
2. What is this sculpture made of? How do you think it was made? What tools would you need to make this sculpture?
3. How do you think the figure would feel if you were to touch it? Although the figure is doll size, would you want to hold it as you would a doll? Why or why not?
4. What is your first reaction to this figure? Its function was to serve the well-being of a community as part of a system of justice. Does knowing the purpose of the object change your feelings about it in any way? If so, in what way?
5. Though this figure is not large, the Kongo people believed it was very powerful. What makes it look powerful? (*Its face, upraised arm, open mouth, the sharp objects protruding from it, and the prickly texture.*)

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<sup>4</sup> Roy Sieber and Roslyn Adele Walker, *African Art and the Cycle of Life* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press), 83.

6. Does the figure appear calm and relaxed or tense and ready to move? What has the artist done to make it look as if it is ready to move? What makes it seem calm?
7. Which of the materials come from the natural environment? Which of the materials were made by humans? If these people made the nails or blades, what skills would they have needed? (*Metal forging.*) If they did not produce some of these human-made materials, how do you think they acquired them? (*Trade with other people.*)
8. The Kongo people used this wooden figure to seal agreements and to solve problems. They pounded nails and other sharp objects into the wood to show their good faith and to activate the power source within the sculpture. What kinds of agreements do you think these nails represent? (*Marriages, trade agreements, contracts, land-dispute settlements.*) For what other reasons might the power of this figure have been invoked? (*To cure sickness, to punish criminals, etc.*)
9. Can you think of ways in which we solve problems and settle disagreements? How do we show that an agreement is sealed?







Chimú (South America, Peru, Andean region)

**Ear Spools**, 1150-1450

Gold

L.5 x W.5<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund, 43.4.1

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## Theme

Worn nearly a thousand years ago in Peru, these dazzling ornaments suggest the importance of the wearer and provide clues to the Chimú society's system of government and religious beliefs.

## Background

The Chimú people inhabited the river valleys and coastal areas of the Central Andes region in western Peru from about 1000 A.D. until conquered by the Incas in 1430. Gold was plentiful in the Peruvian Andes; much of it gathered as pure flakes or nuggets from streams or rivers. To obtain gold from ore, the Chimú used fire and water to break up ore-bearing rocks. In later times, gold was mined by digging shafts in the mountains.

Although the Chimú were skilled potters, Chimú craftsmen excelled above all in metalworking, particularly gold. The Chimú made greater use of precious metals than any other people in ancient Peruvian history, creating a tremendous diversity of forms including ceremonial weapons, tools, jewelry, and vessels.<sup>5</sup>

Chimú society was structured in a rigid caste system headed by the nobility. Below the nobility in status, a small aristocratic minority constituted the bureaucracy that actually governed the state. Most of the population were commoners, many of whom helped build the large cities for which the Chimú are known. Chan Chan, their capital, was one of the most splendid cities in ancient Peru. Archaeological excavations reveal that many of the commoners in Chan Chan were artisans, whose quarters contained tools for woodworking, spinning, weaving, and metalworking. The state supported these artisans, who produced great quantities of ceremonial vessels and personal ornaments for the nobility.

The custom of wearing ear ornaments has been practiced by people throughout the world. In many ancient South American cultures, ear piercing and the wearing of ear ornaments had religious connotations and were associated with protection from evil spirits. The Chimú people may have believed that spirits were responsible for health or illness and that evil spirits could enter a person's body through its orifices. Thus ear ornaments, inserted into pierced earlobes, were worn as protection. Over time, ornaments became larger and more ornate, and simple ear piercing did not suffice. It became necessary to wear ear spools of increasing size and weight from childhood on, in order to gradually stretch the pierced lobes to accommodate the large tubes of the ornaments.

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<sup>5</sup>Luis G. Lumbreras, *The Peoples and Cultures of Ancient Peru* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974) 188.

## **Ear Spools**

These ear spools were worn as a mark of distinction and status by a high-ranking man of the Chimú society. The large disks of the ear spools also protected the wearer from evil spirits by covering the ear orifices. In Chimú society, such ornaments were probably worn only on special occasions and by men of high rank.

Each of these ear spools weighs about five ounces. The posts, which are five inches long and about one inch in diameter, were inserted through perforations in the earlobes. They were tied together at the back of the neck to stabilize the ornaments. Although the ear spools are relatively light in weight, their size and shape must have made them difficult to wear.

Each disk is decorated with a complex figural scene. The central figure in each scene represents a deity or king who wears an elaborate crescent-shaped headdress decorated with four bangles, which are smaller disks attached to the main disk with wire. In his right hand, the figure holds a beaker, called a *kero*, a symbol of power and identity used in many Andean religious and state ceremonies. The object in his left hand looks like a cylindrical cup. He stands on a litter (an apparatus composed of long, horizontal shafts that support a platform on which a person can be carried). Supporting the litter are three anthropomorphic figures with human bodies and monkeylike ears and tails. They appear to be lower in status than the central figure since they are placed below him in a supporting role and are smaller in scale. Two of these figures wear smaller, simpler versions of the central figure's headdress, indicating their status, and also carry some type of cup. The significance of the cups is not known; perhaps they were intended to receive the contents of the chief figure's beaker. The third and smallest figure, located in the lower center, is adorned with just a bangle. Monkeys holding staffs appear often in Chimú art as symbols of authority. Like the *Winged Genius*, these mythical human-animal figures may indicate a belief in the supernatural. Other mythical figures on the ear spools are serpent heads on the ends of the litter shafts and two-headed felines represented in stylized designs that wind around the posts (these are difficult to see on the reproduction).

Each disk has decorative, small-scale surface detailing, such as the tiny gold beads on the rim and the rich patterning on the headdresses. The circular shape of the disk and post is echoed by the crescent-shaped headdresses, the figures' faces, the monkeylike ears and spiraling tails, the rim beading, and the small bangles attached to the disk.

We can imagine how impressive a Chimú nobleman must have looked wearing these ear spools as part of his ceremonial attire. The dazzle of gold, the light glancing off the bangles as he moved, the very size of the ear spools would have contributed to his splendid and imposing appearance.

## **Technique**

A number of goldsmithing techniques were used in making the disks of the ear spools. First the gold was melted and cast into flat sheets by pressing it between two flat slabs of stone or clay. Gold disks were cut from the flat sheet with sharp chisels and then hammered on a wooden surface into a shallow concave shape. During the hammering process, the gold had to be annealed, or heated, to keep it malleable.


Flat sheet gold was also used to make the figures that decorate the disks. The shapes were cut and then embossed by hammering the backs over a wooden mold to form the relief. The details were incised on the front later with sharp chisels. The fully formed figures were then soldered to the shallow disk. The gold bangles were probably cut from sheets of gold by means of a hollow tubular tool called a punch. The hollow gold beads on the rim of the disk were molded in halves and then forced together in a press. The beads were strung on wire and soldered to the edge.


While these ear spools were constructed primarily by cutting and manipulating two-dimensional sheets, the goldsmiths of the ancient Americas had mastered nearly all of the goldworking techniques known today. Despite the sophistication of the techniques, the tools used were of the simplest kind. Materials at hand such as stone, pieces of wood, and even bone were often used. Archaeological excavations have also uncovered instruments such as punches, chisels, blowpipes, wooden models, and welding tools.


## Artist


The Chimú had learned goldsmithing techniques from their predecessors in the area, the Moche people, but they achieved new heights in the art of working gold, and Chimú goldsmiths were accorded high prestige.


## Cultural Clues

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The ornateness of these ear spools suggests that they were worn for special occasions by a person of high status. The gold material and intricate workmanship suggest that the ornaments are precious.
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Since these ear spools display a high level of craftsmanship, they reflect a society that valued aesthetics and decoration.
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The ear spools provide information about the level of Chimú technology in metallurgy and the tools available to the Chimú for obtaining, refining, and working gold.
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The placement, scale, and attire of the figures suggest a hierarchical society. The central figure appears to be the most important since he is the largest and placed above the other three figures, which support him on a litter. Because two of the supporting figures wear headdresses and are larger than the one in the lower center, they seem to be of middle status. The smallest figure appears to be of lowest status.
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The mythical figures of hybrid human and animal forms suggest a religious belief in the supernatural.

## Suggested Questions

1. What do you think these objects are? How do you think they may have been used?
2. How many figures do you see on each ear spool? Are they entirely human? How can you tell? What animal features do they have? What human features do they have?
3. Notice the figures carrying the platform. Are they all alike? What is the same about them? What is different about them?
4. What is the largest figure wearing? What do you think he is holding in his hands? What is the main figure standing on?
5. How are the smaller figures similar to the largest figure? How are they different from the largest figure?
6. Why do you think the artist made the figures different sizes? Of the four figures, which appears to be most important? Why do you think so? The least important? Why do you think so?
7. Can you find where all nine bangles have been attached to the ear spool? Are they all the same size?
8. What material was used to make these ear spools? How can you tell? Can you tell which parts were made from sheets of gold? (Disks and posts.) How do you know? Which parts were attached to the disk? What makes you say that? How do you think they were attached? (Beads are strung on a wire and are soldered onto rim; figures are soldered; bangles are attached with gold wires.)
9. What tools do you think were used to make these ear spools? Where do you think a hammer was used? Where was a sharply pointed tool used? What parts appear to be made with a mold? (*The figures and their headdresses, the litter, beads.*) Where was a punch used? What does this tell us about the level of Chimú technology?
10. Each ear spool is five inches in diameter. This is about as big as your hand with the fingers stretched out, or the size of a small paper plate. Do you think the ear spools are light or heavy? What makes you say that? Would you like to wear earrings this size? Why or why not?
11. What do you think the ear spools looked like when they were worn? Do you think you would notice if someone were to walk by wearing a set of these spools? Each ear spool has nine bangles attached to the main disk. What do you think they would look like in the bright sun? How would they be different if they had been made from wood? Would they be lighter? Heavier? Less shiny? Would you like them as much? Why or why not?
12. Do you see anything on these ear spools that suggests the Chimú believed in the supernatural? If so, what is it? Do any other objects in this unit suggest that other cultures believed in the supernatural? (*Winged Genius, nkisi nkondi.*)

13. Each ear spool is five inches in diameter. How heavy do you think each is? Would you like to wear earrings this size? Why or why not?
14. Do you think everyone in the Chimú culture wore ear spools like this? Why or why not? Do you think the ear spools were worn every day? Why or why not? What do they tell us about the wealth or importance of the person wearing them? From looking at these ear spools, what do you think was important to the Chimú people?



Assyrian (Asia, Iraq, Assyria, Nimrud)

***Winged Genius***, c. 883-859 B.C.

Limestone

H.90 x W.41 inches

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund, 41.9

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## Theme

This carved limestone relief (a type of sculpture in which forms project from a background) provides a wealth of information about the ancient Assyrians and their concept of power.

## Background

For three centuries (900–600 B.C.) the Assyrians were the dominant power in the ancient Near East, controlling a vast empire. Ruled by warrior kings, they had a reputation for brutality and ruthlessness. The Assyrians lived in a constant state of warfare, defending their expanding empire.

Using art as a tool of propaganda, Assyrian kings undertook enormous building projects to display their might and glorify their power. One of the greatest early rulers was Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 B.C.) who established his capital in Nimrud, a city on the east bank of the Tigris River (in modern-day Iraq). There he built a magnificent palace with royal apartments, reception halls, treasuries, sanctuaries, and service quarters, all surrounded by lush gardens and orchards.

Many of the rooms had eight-foot high stone panels with relief scenes picturing Ashurnasirpal as a hunter and warrior. Other panels show him as spiritual leader and protector of his people, appearing with semi-divine figures called genii.

## ***Winged Genius***

This relief sculpture was one of many such carved limestone panels that lined the walls of a large ceremonial hall in the palace at Nimrud. It was excavated in the mid-19th century by the British archaeologist Sir Henry Layard, who uncovered the remains of temples and palaces built by Ashurnasirpal II and some of his successors. Like the figures on the Chimú ear spools, this mythical winged genius, or guardian deity, is part human and part fantastic.

This panel was intended primarily as political propaganda, and its composition (organization) and subject matter were designed to instill in the visitor a sense of awe and reverence for the king. The winged genius is an imposing image of power, standing larger than life at 7½ feet tall. While his head and feet are shown in profile, his torso is in three-quarters view, revealing the massiveness of his body, with its powerful shoulders and legs, and oversized hands. The muscles of the arms and legs have been carefully articulated. With his elaborately fringed costume and feathered wings, the heavily muscled figure crowds the frame and projects from the limestone surface. His hair and beard are meticulously arranged in wavy strands and rows of tight curls. The deeply carved eye is almond shaped, and a slight smile appears on his face. The deity wears a headband, an earring, bracelets with rosette designs, and an armband.

Tucked into his belt are two daggers and a whetstone (used to sharpen tools) designed with an animal head. One hand is raised in allegiance to the king, while the other carries a small bucket. This bucket was used to perform fertility rituals associated with the date palm, a tree sacred to the Assyrians because it was the major source of food, drink, wood, and shelter. It probably contained pollen or other sacred substances.

All of the panels in the ceremonial hall at Nimrud were originally painted in bright colors. The heeled sandals of this figure still show traces of the original red paint. Just imagine the dazzling effect of the hall, lined with brilliantly colored panels of deities. This winged genius was only one of the many powerful figures that marched in endless procession around the walls of the palace.

Running across the center section of the panel is wedge-shaped writing, called cuneiform, which further communicates the power of the king. The inscription explains his military conquests, his cruelty to his enemies, and his intimacy with the gods. Thus the sculpture served both to glorify the king and to intimidate his enemies.

The strength of the image is reinforced by compositional elements such as scale, line, and pattern. As in Chuck Close's portrait *Frank*, the large scale of the *Winged Genius* makes a dramatic impact and demands our attention. But *Frank's* portrait is naturalistic, while the *Winged Genius* is stylized—depicted with bold, simplified forms that exaggerate details found in nature, such as the clearly delineated muscles of the calf and the large staring eye. An abundance of linear detail creates a rich decorative effect, forming dense patterns of fringe, feathers, tassels, hair, and beard. The wealth of pattern and detail contributes to our sense of awe.

## Technique

This relief is carved on a slab of limestone that came from quarries near Nimrud. It formed part of the stone veneer protecting the walls of the mud-brick Assyrian palace. Fastened together by clamps, the panel and others like it lined the audience halls and courtyards of the palace.

The carving was done in low relief, in which forms project slightly from a background. This is a subtractive process: the stone is cut away to create the forms. The sculptor probably used a wooden mallet and chisel to chip away large areas and then, with sharp pointed tools, incised the many linear details such as feathers, curls, muscles, and the cuneiform inscription.

## Artist

Since this panel was intended for political purposes, the anonymous artist who created it probably worked under the authority of the king. Most likely a master craftsman planned the overall design of the room and supervised a team of artisans doing the actual work. The sensitive carving suggests that the artist who sculpted this panel was highly skilled.



## Cultural Clues

- The imposing nature of this image suggests that it was a figure of importance to the Assyrian culture and was viewed with awe and respect. The figure is part human but has wings, suggesting that belief in the supernatural was an aspect of the culture.
- The figure carries weapons, which suggests a military society.
- Because this figure was created for political purposes, the sculptor who carved it worked in the service of the king, unlike Chuck Close or Clementine Hunter, who created their art for personal reasons.
- The large scale of the sculpture and its original context suggest a culture that intended to remain in one place.
- The metal weapons, rich textiles, and jewelry suggest a sophisticated technology.
- The interest in decoration, jewelry, clothing, and refined detail suggests that the Assyrians, despite their warlike image, appreciated art and fine craftsmanship.
- Cuneiform writing is evidence of a written language and recorded history.

## Suggested Questions

1. Does this figure look strong or weak? Why do you say that? What makes him look strong?
2. What is the figure wearing on his arms? What is the figure wearing on his head? Describe his hair. Is it curly, wavy or straight? How is his hair different from Frank's hair in Chuck Close's painting? How about his mustache and beard? Do you see any patterns on the figure? Where?
3. Can you find the weapons this figure carries? Where are they and how are they carried? What do you think he carries in his left hand?
4. Does he look warlike or friendly? What makes you say that? Why might the figure be carrying knives?
5. What is on the figure's back? Does this figure look like a real person? How is it different from ordinary people? Do you think he has supernatural power? Why do you say that?
6. What is the figure wearing? Would this kind of clothing be worn in hot weather or cold weather? What makes you say that? Do you think his clothes would cost a lot of money or would they be inexpensive? What makes you think so?

7. What material do you think this sculpture is made from? How can you tell? This figure was carved from a large piece of limestone. What tools do you think the artist used to carve it? Do you think that the figure can be seen from all sides of the sculpture? (*Not from the back.*) Why? (*This is a relief sculpture, in which forms are carved from a flat background. They project from only one side.*)
8. This carved panel was one of many that were linked together to decorate a ceremonial hall in the palace at Nimrud. How do you think visitors to the palace would have felt when they entered the room? Would they have felt relaxed? Comfortable? Surprised? Scared? Why do you say that? If you were to walk into such a room, how would you feel? Why?
9. Why would a king want a figure like this on the walls of his palace? What does this figure tell us about the king? If you were a ruler and had a palace, what kind of creature would you choose to put on the walls? Why? What would the creature tell us about you?
10. This carved panel was one of many that were linked together to decorate a ceremonial hall in the palace at Nimrud. How do you think visitors to the palace would have reacted to it? Would they be comforted? Awed? Intimidated? If you were to walk into such a room, would the figures impress you? Why?
11. This panel was originally painted. Do you think this would have made it seem more or less impressive?
12. Where do you see a form of writing on this panel? **Point out cuneiform.** What does this tell us about the Assyrian culture? (*The Assyrians had a language that could be written and read.*) What do you think it says? Why do you think that?
13. Do you think the Assyrians moved from place to place, or do you think they stayed in one place for some time? Why do you think so?
14. Why do you think a group of people would build walls paneled with figures that emphasized power? Are there any images of power from other cultures represented in this unit? (*Nkisi nkondi, Ear Spools.*) Compare and contrast their roles in the various cultures. If you were a ruler and had a palace, what kind of power figure would you portray on the walls? Why? What would that power figure tell us about you?





Clementine Hunter, American, 1885–1988

***The Wash***, 1950s

Oil on board

H.18 x W.24 inches

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund, 91.88.2

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## **Theme**

This colorful scene of women doing the wash in an outdoor setting provides evidence of what life was like for Clementine Hunter and other black Americans living on a Louisiana plantation in the 1950s.

## **Background**

The 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution outlawed slavery in 1865. Nonetheless, many black Americans in the South had no recourse but to remain on the lands of their former masters, working for low wages and under conditions only slightly better than those of slavery. By the turn of the century, many blacks were leaving the South in search of a better life. However, limited work opportunities in both the North and the South, as well as racial intolerance, kept many others on the plantations. Some landowners persuaded generations of black workers to remain on plantations and farms with promises of higher wages and good treatment.

Clementine Hunter lived and worked at Melrose Plantation in the Cane River region in northern Louisiana. Although life was limited and difficult for many African Americans, Hunter was able to find joy, beauty, and intense pride in her experiences at Melrose, where she lived most of her long life.

Melrose Plantation had long been established on the northwest bank of the Cane River near Natchitoches (NAK-uh-tesh), Louisiana. It was first owned by the second son of Marie Thérèse Coincoin. Marie Thérèse Coincoin was a former slave and mistress of Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer. In 1778, Metoyer freed Marie Thérèse Coincoin and their children and granted her 68 acres of land. With this land, she maintained a thriving agricultural empire, gaining thousands of acres of land through grants, which she used for cotton, corn, tobacco and cattle. Due to economic hardships, the descendants of Coincoin were forced to sell the property. In 1898, John Hampton Henry and his wife, Cammie, became owners of the plantation. Known for her boundless energy, Cammie set out to restore Melrose to its former glory with a sense of place and history, reviving local arts and crafts. Under her ownership, Melrose became a mecca for the arts, culture, and hospitality.

## ***The Wash***

This painting depicts three women doing the plantation laundry outdoors at a time when clothes were still boiled and scrubbed with lye soap. Their surroundings are sunny yellow fields, lush green trees, and a brilliant green and blue sky. Standing on a grassy ledge, a woman with graying hair smokes a pipe while she stirs the laundry boiling in a large black pot brimming with

soapsuds. Flanking her are two women scrubbing clothes on boards. All three wear colorful straw hats, dresses with long skirts, and aprons, one with a bright red patch. Behind the women, red and blue union suits and bright white towels hang on the line. Though the women are engaged in a mundane task, the scene evokes no sense of drudgery. Instead, Hunter's bright colors and flat, simple forms convey joy and vitality. Perhaps she is expressing her pleasure in the elements of her workaday world—the warmth of the sun, the beauty of the rural South, and the opportunity to socialize with other women on the plantation.

On the right stands a brick and cypress structure with wide eaves called the African House. It was built around 1800 under the direction of Marie Thérèse Coincoin. The architecture of the Africa House is thought to be a direct derivation of traditional African homes. She used part of the house as a store and another part as a prison for slaves. Hunter later painted murals inside the African House, under the sponsorship of the owner at that time, J.H. Henry. The house still stands at Melrose Plantation, now a historical site.

Hunter is referred to as a folk artist because she had no formal art training and worked outside the mainstream art world. Like other folk artists, she recorded and preserved the traditions of her heritage. She painted scenes familiar to her from her life at Melrose, often repeating subjects again and again. Events such as weddings, funerals, and Saturday-night parties are frequent themes, as are scenes of people picking cotton, threshing pecans, and boiling wash in the plantation yard. Her paintings of daily activity of black Americans living on Melrose are based on her recollection of these events. They have a freshness and spontaneity that expresses her joyful, exuberant feelings about plantation life.

Hunter's penchant for pure primary colors of red, yellow, and blue gives the work vibrancy, as do the warm hues that vividly capture the warmth of this sunny southern setting. She did not paint a naturalistic scene according to the laws of perspective, but defined her figures and forms in broad patches of color, with virtually no modeling in lights and darks. Her approach differs greatly from that used in *Princess Charlotte*, where Clouet rendered his subject with attention to minute details and a sense of volume—the appearance of existing in space—by modeling with light and dark. In Hunter's painting, background and foreground are not clearly delineated; instead objects are stacked above one another to suggest distance. Thus, the clothesline, house, and tree seem to hover above the women's heads, while at the same time they appear to be behind the three women.

## Technique

Hunter created several thousand paintings in her career. She painted on any material available to her including cardboard boxes, brown paper bags, scraps of plywood, and window shades. Among the more unusual materials she used were snuff bottles, wine jugs, gourds, and even black iron skillet.

In *The Wash* she applied oil paint to the surface of Masonite board, working from memory without the preliminary use of sketches or models. Her direct approach to painting contrasts with the painstaking and laborious method used by Chuck Close in translating his image of Frank from a photograph.





## Artist

Born in 1885 on Hidden Hill Plantation in Louisiana, Clementine Hunter moved to Melrose Plantation at the age of 16. Her father was a field hand and her mother a plantation cook. At Melrose, Hunter worked in the cotton fields and later in the main house as a cook. She gained fame for her culinary skill at a time when Melrose hospitality was a legend in Louisiana. Throughout her long life she remained at Melrose, marrying twice and raising five children there.

Because Melrose's owner, Cammie Henry, encouraged visual artists, writers, and musicians to visit and work on the plantation, Hunter was exposed to a wide variety of art. She began to paint when she was nearly 60, inspired by some paints and brushes left behind by a visiting artist. From that moment on, she zealously pursued painting. Soon she received national recognition, winning the Julius Rosenwald Foundation Grant in 1945. In 1953 Hunter was hailed by *Look* magazine as among the most notable folk painters in the country. Two years later, she was the first black artist to be featured in one-person shows at both the Delgado Museum (now the New Orleans Museum of Art) and Northwestern State University in Natchitoches. In 1955, she also undertook an important project, painting murals for the African House. These consisted of nine large panels that encircled the top floor of this unique structure, showing colorful scenes of the activities and pageantry of plantation life.

Though Hunter received no formal training, her career was influenced by François Mignon, a Frenchman who visited Melrose in 1938 and stayed on to become curator of the plantation library. He became Hunter's mentor and supporter, encouraging her until his death in 1980. Clementine Hunter became something of a legend in her own lifetime. She received unprecedented recognition for a black folk artist, and in 1986 she was given an honorary doctoral degree by Northwestern State University. Her works can be seen in private and public collections throughout the United States and Europe.

## Cultural Clues

-  This painting offers clues to the environment of the three women depicted, suggesting a warm, sunny setting where people could enjoy being outdoors. The setting appears to be in the country or an open expansive area with a yard, flourishing trees, and a house.
-  Washing and drying machines had been invented by the 1950s, but this painting portrays a time of simple technology when people boiled laundry with lye soap and hung it outside to dry.
-  Unlike Princess Charlotte's portrait, which was painted because the subject was a member of a royal family, this painting reveals an interest in the ordinary life of common people, which we see the everyday activity of doing the wash and in the simplicity of their attire.
-  The flat forms and lack of minute detail and perspective suggest that the artist chose to paint in a direct, intuitive manner—expressing how she felt about the subject without using the rules of perspective.



The small size of this painting suggests that it was made for personal use, perhaps to hang in a home.

## Suggested Questions

1. What are the women doing in this painting? How are they washing the clothes? What tools are they using? What part of the washing is each woman doing? How is this different from the way clothes are washed at your house?
2. Is this scene taking place today or a long time ago? How can you tell?
3. What is the weather like in the painting? Does it look sunny or cloudy? How can you tell? What colors do you see? Are they mostly warm or cool colors? Are the colors dull or bright? Do you see any places where two colors are mixed? Where are they? Where do the colors appear to be pure?
4. Do you think Clementine Hunter painted a happy picture or a sad picture? Why? Do you think the women are enjoying their work? Why?
5. How has the artist suggested that some things are farther away than others? Foreground in a work of art is the area closest to the viewer. Background is the area farthest away from the viewer. What is in the foreground? What is in the background?
6. Clementine Hunter did not attempt to paint a naturalistic scene. What parts of her painting appear least naturalistic? (*Flatness of figures, lack of details, faces, some of the colors such as the bright yellow fields, the trees.*)
7. We learned that Chuck Close painted precisely what he saw in the photograph. Do you think Clementine Hunter painted exactly what she saw? Or did she paint how she felt about the subject? Why do you think so?
8. Would you like to be in this scene? Why or why not? If you could be there, where would you like to be? What would you like to be doing?
9. Pretend you are an anthropologist who has discovered this painting in the year 3000. What does it tell you about the culture? How do you think it was used? (Its small scale suggests that it was made for personal use; it serves as a document of daily life; it suggests a society living in a warm climate with people doing the laundry out of doors by hand.) What clues does it offer about the technology of this society? About the role of the artist?
10. Why do you think Clementine Hunter chose to paint a scene of women doing the wash? How would her painting be different if she made it today? What activities from your life would you like to show in a work of art?
11. The house in this painting is called the African House. The African House was designed and built according to one woman's recollections of her home in Africa. What aspects of your household reflect the heritage of members of your family? What continents or countries did your family come from? How long ago? Have you ever visited any of those places? What do you remember most about any of those places?







Venice (Europe, Italy)

**Writing Desk**, c. 1760

Wood, paint, gilt, gilt bronze

H.53<sup>9</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x W.60<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x D.28<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches

The Putnam Dana McMillian Fund, 76.74

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## Theme

By carefully examining this writing desk and its elaborate decoration, we can imagine what life was like in a Venetian palace during the 18th century.

## Background

The city of Venice is built on a cluster of small islands in the Adriatic Sea. It has canals for streets, with picturesque stone bridges across the canals and splendid palaces along the banks. Once a great maritime and commercial power of Italy, Venice was declining as an economic force by the 18th century. Nevertheless, the nobility continued to spend their money on lavish dwellings and furnishings, building many new palaces and renovating old ones.

An 18th-century innovation in interior design was the attention paid to decorating the smaller rooms of a palace, which previously were used for everyday living but not necessarily for show, as the grand rooms and state apartments were. Many of these small rooms were decorated in the Rococo style, a style of art and interior decoration that was especially popular in France but spread throughout Europe during the 18th century. The Rococo style is characterized by delicate curving forms, gay pastel colors, and fanciful decoration.

Italian Rococo had a melodramatic quality that was particularly evident in the furniture of Venice—a city known for its opera, theater, masquerades, and carnivals. Venetian furniture of this time is remarkable for its bold design, lively carving, and brilliant lacquered decoration of flowers and figures. Venice was a center for the production of lacquered furniture in the 18th century.

## Writing Desk

This elaborate and unusual Rococo writing desk was made for an 18th-century Venetian palace. It has a graceful, flowing organic form. The sinuous curves, delicate gilt carving, and pastel painted flowers are both sumptuous and playful—an effect accentuated by the combination of three-dimensional carved decoration with two-dimensional painted panels. Overall, the structure is symmetrical, but the decorative detailing is asymmetrical, as can be seen in the front corners and base supports. This desk seems to have been conceived more as sculpture than as furniture.

The profusion of detail gives the desk an aura of mystery, since the forms are not immediately recognizable. On close examination, however, we can identify various motifs, many of which are derived from nature, such as flowers, foliage, and several kinds of seashells. On the center

painted ornament, called a *cartouche*, the winged figure of Father Time appears with a scythe and an hourglass.

Because of the desk's ornateness, its function is not immediately apparent, yet it was made to be both decorative and practical. It was designed as part of a unified plan for creating a delightful room. The back is unfinished, suggesting that the desk was intended for a particular place in the room. Somewhat obscured by the swirling decoration are six keyholes for six panels that open to reveal the desk's interior.

Looking at the photograph of the desk with the panels open, we can see a writing surface and drawers. The lower part of the desk opens at the front to reveal three drawers, and the two side panels hide storage spaces. The drawers are delicately painted with flowers like those on the outside of the panels. The insides of the panels are lacquered in green and gold with curvilinear designs. The upper panel lifts to disclose more decoration, carved and gilded to match the small drawers on top. We can only wonder about the precious items that might have been stored in the drawers and recesses of this desk!



## Technique

The carved wood of the desk has been coated with a ground of gesso (a mixture of ground plaster and glue) to which gold leaf has been applied. The process of covering a surface with thin sheets of gold is called gilding. This desk has both matte and shiny areas of gilding. In some areas, the gesso ground appears to have been engraved with small dots with a tool called a punch, making the gilding look rougher in texture. Gilt bronze hinges allow the six panels to open and close, and other pieces of gilt bronze also adorn the desk. The colorful floral decoration was done with oil paints.

## Artist

Many different artists and craftsmen would have worked together to make this desk: a master carpenter to plan the overall design, a sculptor to do the carving, a painter to decorate the panels, and another specialist to apply the gold leaf and lacquer.

## Cultural Clues

- Like the Chimú ear spoons, this desk displays an abundant use of precious gold and fancy ornamentation, suggesting that it belonged to a wealthy person.
- The complexity and richness of the desk's ornamentation reflect a high level of craftsmanship and aesthetic quality.
- Although we know that it was meant for a palace, this desk seems to be about the right size for our own homes. (It is about 4½ feet high by 5 feet wide.) It was probably placed in a smaller room of the palace.
- Its human scale and playful appearance suggest that the desk was used for personal purposes rather than for public or government matters. It does not have the formal, stately character we would expect of palace furniture. We cannot help but wonder what was kept in those hidden drawers. Could they have held secret letters, a diary, chapters from a novel, or household bills? The unfinished back is a clue to the way the desk was used: it was designed for one spot in a room and planned as part of a unified interior.

## Suggested Questions

1. Look at the photo that shows the object closed. What do you think this object is? Can you tell how it was used? Now look at the photo that shows the object opened. Can you see how this object was used? Where are the drawers? What surface would you use to write a letter? If you were to write at this desk, would you be able to sit down? Would you be comfortable? Why?
2. Look at the photo of the desk closed. What do you see painted on the outside of the desk doors? What do you see carved on the outside of the desk? Can you find a carved human figure? Can you find hinges and keyholes? Look at the photo of the desk open. Describe the two-dimensional image painted on the large drawers. How many drawers do you see?
3. What do you think was kept in the desk drawers? Why do you say that? Could they have held secret letters? A diary? Chapters from a novel the owner was writing? Household bills?
4. Who do you think might have owned this desk? Do you think that it was commissioned for a particular person to be used in a particular place, or do you think it was mass-produced and bought by a shopper who happened to like it and could afford it? Where

would it have been used—in an office, a cottage, or a palace? Why do you say that? This desk is from a palace in Venice, an Italian city on the Adriatic Sea. Does anything about this desk suggest that it comes from a place near the sea? (*Seashells.*)

5. Does your desk at school or at home look like this? How is it the same? How is it different? Would you want a desk like this in your room? Why or why not?
6. Do you think this was hard to make? What materials were used to make this desk?
7. One of these photos shows the desk closed. The other shows the desk open for use. Do you think the person who owned the desk left it opened or closed most of the time? Why do you think that? From its appearance, do you think it was made to be used or to be looked at?
8. Can you guess what kind of person owned this desk? What clues does the desk give you about this person? Do you think it was a man or a woman? Why do you say that? Did this person work hard every day? How did he or she dress? Do you think he or she dusted the desk? Who did?
9. You have studied two portraits in this unit—one of Frank and one of Princess Charlotte. Do you think that either of them would have owned a desk like this? Why do you say that?