

***Coming into View* | Faculty Guide**

Half landscapes and half portraits, this exhibition showcases sixteen oil paintings from the museum's permanent collection. Many of these paintings have never been displayed to the public before due to incomplete information or much-needed care and conservation. However, scholarship has led to specialty conservation, and collaborations have brought new perspectives to bear on the techniques, meaning, and relevance of each piece. Many fascinating details of these paintings have emerged with the assistance of class research assignments, intern projects, and graduate assistant work. *Coming into View* underlines the importance of students and academics as a vital part of the McClung Museum's mission to share new stories by gaining a better understanding of our collection.

Before Your Visit

To prepare, faculty may ask students to consider, explore, or define some key terms:

accession
conservation
landscape
portrait
mood
tone
romanticization

During Your Visit

Coming into View may be explored through the following overarching educational themes. Use one or more to focus a conversation on the exhibition and/or to develop student assignments. Below is a summary of each theme and corresponding questions designed to drive dialogue.

Theme 1: Item Accession & Conservation

When considering an accession, a museum must first decide if it can provide the necessary space, time, and resources to care for the object. When objects are housed in a museum collection, or when they are chosen for display, they are often

susceptible to damage due to age, moisture, light, etc. When this happens, museum staff must decide what items to prioritize for conservation.

- Who makes the decisions about what objects are accessioned? About what is displayed? About what is conserved? Why do they make the decisions they do? Who or what might they consult before making these decisions?
- These processes may differ in an academic institution, such as the McClung Museum. Why is this? How might faculty research, student scholarship, or university coursework impact these decisions?
- Deaccessioning, or removing an object from a collection, is a big topic within museums. Though all museums deaccession collections at some point, it is a very big and complicated process. Explore this topic. Why might an institution make the decision to deaccession an object? How might this stay the same or change over a museum's lifetime?

Theme 2: Community Representation

Though very different, both *Landscape with Stream* by Lloyd Branson and *Les Deux Bretonnes (Two Bretonnes Women)* by Bernard Buffet, are representative of the artist's place in time, reflective of the emotions and landscape of the artists' communities.

- Compare and contrast these two paintings by reflecting on the subject, medium, tone, and mood of each. Which piece do you think is more impactful? Which do you think more clearly represents a specific community: a portrait or a landscape? Can portraits and landscapes be used to represent more than one community?
- Thinking more broadly, and beyond the literal, how does art represent a community? Does art have to be realistic to be reflective of a community?
- Reflect on the imagery of each work. Are there elements only a member of that particular community would be familiar with? Consider the biographic information given about these two artists (and if necessary, do your own research). Do you think it is possible for art to be untainted by an artist's reality?

Theme 3: Outsider Representation

Several artists in this exhibition have chosen to focus their paintings on a subject or subject matter from a community not their own, which may contribute to the romanticization of stories and the spread of perspectives that are inaccurate or damaging to a particular community. As viewers, it is important to be aware of this so that we are not perpetuating misinformation, whether consciously or subconsciously.

- Think about the power that is often at play in art galleries and museums. Whose art has been commonly featured? What kind of art has been commonly featured?
- Do you think artists must be a part of a community to portray it? What might be some differences in insider versus outsider representations?
- Historically, what kind of art do you see in museums in the United States and in Europe? Has that changed with contemporary art? How might that differ between regions or countries? Would the same art interest other audiences?

Theme 4: Titles, Labels, and Portrayals

The opinions and feelings held by a viewer about a particular artwork goes beyond what is captured on the canvas, and instead includes elements such as the title chosen by the artist and the way in which a piece is displayed. The purpose of a museum exhibition is to contextualize objects in order to successfully communicate wider topics and themes to audiences.

- Most of the portraits in this exhibition feature women. Reflect on these portrayals. What colors and shapes are commonly used? Broadly speaking, does the portrayal of women differ in works done by women versus those done by men? How are gender and sexuality explored in art? Do you see that reflected in these portraits?
- Consider the titles of each portrait. What kind of impact do they have? Does your view on a particular piece change because of the title?
- Take a closer look at the labels written for each portrait. What are some differences between the use of the word “sensitive” in the labels for Henrietta Wachman’s *Arab Chieftan* and Lloyd Branson’s *Tillie McClung*? How about the word choices of the other labels?
- How does a portrait of a specific person differ from a portrait of an imagined person? Do you think it is easier for an artist to create a portrait with or without a reference?

Beyond the Exhibition

Faculty may consider the following prompts designed to extend conversations beyond the exhibition.

1. Museum Labels

There are typically two types of labels that exist alongside an object on display in a museum: an identification label and an interpretive label. An identification label (also known as a tombstone label) provides basic information about the object, such as the creator’s name, the creation date/place, the medium, and a summary of how/when the museum came to

possess the object. An interpretive label communicates the story of an object within the wider context of the exhibition. Interpretive labels are written to spark curiosity in visitors by providing guidance on how to think more critically about what is in front of them, offering a more meaningful experience in front of an object.

As you make your way through the gallery, take a closer look at the identification and interpretive labels. Choose two pieces of art, and think critically about what is being said, about any implications beyond the existing text. Think about the stories being told. Are there unifying themes between the two, beyond what is stipulated on the labels? Once you've made your discoveries, find a piece of art (beyond the ones in this exhibition) that contributes to the stories and themes you identified. Write an identification label and interpretive label that fits with your vision. Take a look at these guides for writing interpretive materials from the [Getty Museum](#) and the [Smithsonian Institution](#). To challenge yourself further, try writing your labels for specific audiences (i.e., fifth grade students versus secondary English teachers).

2. **Mental Illness & Art**

As seen in the label for Ralph Albert Blakelock's *Rising Moon*, an artist's work often becomes more popular amidst personal struggles. Like Blakelock, Vincent Van Gogh, Sylvia Plath, Robert Schumann, and many other creatives famously struggled with mental illness throughout their lifetimes. The Karolinska Institutet, a medical university in Sweden, studied 1.2 million patients and their relatives to look for connections between mental illness and creativity. Their study found that certain mental disorders are more prevalent in people with artistic or scientific professions. Authors, specifically, had the highest number of individuals with schizophrenia, depression, anxiety syndrome, and substance abuse (2014). The notion of the "mad genius" has persisted for centuries. Socrates wrote, "madness... is the channel by which we receive the greatest blessings... madness is a thing nobler than sober sense."

Look up examples of "asylum art" or locate artistic depictions of mental illness. Are there any connections between mental illness and creativity? Do you believe people must suffer to create? Why do you think art created by a "mad genius" is so profitable?

3. **Commercial Success & Pulp Novels**

Long before Amazon took over as the largest bookseller in the world, squashing physical bookstores such as Barnes & Noble and Borders, the creation of pulp fiction changed the game. Pulp fiction, popularized in the 1940s, were paperback books produced in large quantities and broadly distributed. The trailblazers in the pulp fiction industry noticed that despite more than 180 million books being printed in the US in 1939, the year the first American mass-market paperback line, Pocket Books, emerged, there were only 2,800 dedicated bookstores ([Menand, 2014](#)). Instead of catering to bookstores, pulp novels began popping up in newsstands, drugstores, bus stations, and cigar shops across the country. Although often considered lowbrow and of poor quality, the emerging presence of pulp novels in heavily frequented retail spaces meant that books became more widely accessible than ever before. In order to appeal to the mass market, publishers began seeking out artists and illustrators to create bold, eye-catching book covers. Thus, pulp art emerged as a distinctive midcentury art form. Arthur Miller's *The Sharpshooter* is one such example of this style.

Look up examples of pulp novels. What kinds of themes and stories are frequently used? Reflect on the taglines and synopses of different pulp novels. What do you see that may appeal to a mass market? Take a look at the books' covers. How are the characters shown? How is the theme displayed? Do you think this art would have been commercially successful at the time? With whom? How about today? To move more broadly, discuss artists known for their commercial success. What prompted that success? Is commercial success different than other kinds of achievements in the art world?

4. **Meaning-Making & Art**

For many, art is an excellent medium to practice a process called “meaning-making.” When one sees the majesty of a horse featured in a painting on the wall, they may connect it with childhood memories from their grandparents' farm. When one hears the strum of a guitar, they may connect it with the first time they heard a Beatles song. Reminders such as these bring up a vast array of emotions and memories, prompting us to draw upon our lived experiences to make sense of what is in front of us.

As you make your way through the gallery, draw upon your own experiences and memories to reflect on the artworks, then demonstrate your meaning-making through a medium of your choosing. Some examples may include:

- a playlist of songs you attribute to individual paintings
- a collection of poems inspired by the works you find the most striking

- a bibliography of resources connected to information found in the labels
- a walking trail map inspired by the featured landscapes

References

Harvard Art Museums. (2015). *Writing on the wall*.

<https://harvardartmuseums.org/article/writing-on-the-wall>

Karolinska Institutet. (2014). *Link between creativity and mental illness confirmed*.

<https://news.ki.se/link-between-creativity-and-mental-illness-confirmed>

Menand, L. (2014). *Pulp's big moment*. The New Yorker.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/05/pulps-big-moment>

Woo, El. (2023). *The link between creativity and mental illness*. Getty.

<https://www.getty.edu/news/the-link-between-creativity-and-mental-illness/>