

# Kerry James Marshall

# MASTRY

Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Painter)*, 2009, acrylic on PVC, 44 5/8 x 43 1/8 x 3 7/8 in., collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Katherine S. Schamberg by exchange, photo by Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago



## Classroom Curriculum Guide

THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES | MARCH 12–JULY 2, 2017 | MOCA GRAND AVENUE

Dear Teachers,

Welcome to *Kerry James Marshall: MASTRY* at MOCA Grand Avenue. This exhibition spans 35 years and includes nearly 80 works from one of America's foremost living painters.

We hope you'll find this 3rd-12th grade classroom guide flexible and adaptable to your needs, whether you're using it to prepare for a visit to the exhibition with your students or as a stand-alone instructional unit.

This guide includes:

- information on how to visit with your class;
- an overview of the exhibition;
- links to videos, teacher resources, and further reading about the artist;
- connections to standards;
- images and quotes from the artist with discussion questions and writing prompts; and
- strategies for conducting inclusive discussions.

For easy classroom viewing, download the accompanying PowerPoint presentation <http://www.moca.org/education/teachers> and use this PDF for your reference during the lesson.

We'd love to hear from you about how you use these materials. Please email your feedback to us at [jhoel@moca.org](mailto:jhoel@moca.org).

We look forward to hearing from you!

—MOCA Education

## HOW TO VISIT THE EXHIBITION WITH YOUR STUDENTS (3RD-12TH GRADE)

- Book your tour as early as possible by contacting MOCA Education at 213-621-1706 x1745 or [education@moca.org](mailto:education@moca.org). Please note demand is high for guided tours and availability may be limited. At least two weeks notice is required for either staff- or self-guided tours.
- Decide which tour option is right for you:
  - Staff-guided:** MOCA Educators lead students in a discussion-based experience in a 1:10 educator-to-student ratio. \$7 per student. Watch the staff-guided tour orientation video with your class to learn what to expect (approx. 9 minutes). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JIO02S6obQ&feature=youtu.be>.
  - Self-guided:** Lead your own tour. Free. Watch the self-guided tour orientation video with your students to prepare (approx. 7 minutes). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aU56i-4lIG0&feature=youtu.be>.
- Please note that for both tour options, one chaperone per 10 students is required.
- We will send you a free pass to preview the exhibition prior to your class visit (recommended).

## EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

MOCA is pleased to present a 35-year retrospective of painter Kerry James Marshall, co-organized by the MCA Chicago, MOCA, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art under the leadership of MOCA's Chief Curator Helen Molesworth. Marshall's figurative paintings have been joyful in their consistent portrayal of African Americans. The now nearly 600 year history of painting contains remarkably few African American painters and even fewer representations of black people. Marshall, a child of the civil rights era, set out to redress this absence. "You can't be born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955 and grow up in South Central [Los Angeles] near the Black Panthers headquarters," Marshall has said, "and not feel like you've got some kind of social responsibility. You can't move to Watts in 1963 and not speak about it. That determined a lot of where my work was going to go..."

This exhibition, Marshall's first major retrospective in the United States, contains nearly 80 paintings, all of which contain images of Black subjects going about their daily business, presented with utter equality and humanity. A deeply accomplished artist, who makes ravishing paintings, Marshall's strategy was three fold. First, as a young artist he decided to paint only black figures. He was unequivocal in his pursuit of black beauty. His figures are an unapologetic ebony black, and they occupy the paintings with a sense of authority and belonging. Second, Marshall worked to make a wide variety of images populated with black people. This led him to make exquisite portraits, lush landscape paintings, everyday domestic interiors, and paintings that depict historical events, all featuring black subjects as if their activities were completely and utterly normal. Third, Marshall concentrated on painterly mastery as a fundamental strategy. By mastering the art of representational and figurative painting, during a period when neither was in vogue, Marshall produced a body of work that bestows beauty and dignity where it had long been denied.

The exhibition unfolds in chronological order, allowing the viewer to trace the development of Marshall as a painter. The exhibition also charts our nation's evolving ideas and attitudes towards race, beginning with an exploration of Ralph Ellison's classic novel *Invisible Man*, which explores the lack of legibility of African Americans in the culture at large, to a suite of paintings dedicated to the exploration of Black love, to portraits of members of the Cato slave rebellion, and culminating in paintings made during the Obama presidency, which feature a stunning set of portraits of black artists at work in their studios. The exhibition catalogue, edited by MOCA Chief Curator Helen Molesworth, chronicles Marshall's career and contains sumptuous color plates of all of the works in the exhibition. It is the most authoritative book on the artist's work to date.

## VIDEOS AND FURTHER READING

Find a good collection of short videos created by museums and the PBS series, Art21:  
<https://www.youtube.com/results?q=art+21+kerry+james+marshall>.

Barbara Isenberg, "For Kerry James Marshall, the mission is clear: Bring portraits of black life into very white museums," *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 2017, accessed March 8, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-et-cm-kerry-james-marshall-20170307-html-story.html>.

Holland Cotter, "Kerry James Marshall's Paintings Show What It Means to be Black in America," *New York Times*, October 20, 2016, accessed March 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/21/arts/design/kerry-james-marshalls-paintings-show-what-it-means-to-be-black-in-america.html>.

Victoria L. Valentine, "'The Figure Remains Essentially Black in Every Circumstance': Kerry James Marshall Previews His Master Paintings at MCA Chicago", *Culture Type*, May 2, 2016, accessed March 8, 2017, <http://www.culturetype.com/2016/05/02/the-figure-remains-essentially-black-in-every-circumstance-kerry-james-marshall-previews-his-master-paintings-at-mca-chicago/>.

## STANDARDS

The discussions and activities in this lesson support both Common Core and California Visual + Performing Arts Standards.

### Common Core State Standards:

#### ANCHOR STANDARDS FOR LANGUAGE:

##### Conventions of Standard English

1. Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

##### Knowledge of Language

3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

##### Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

6. Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career-readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

#### ANCHOR STANDARDS FOR SPEAKING AND LISTENING:

##### Comprehension and Collaboration

1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.

### California Visual Art Standards:

**1.0 Artistic Perception:** Processing, Analyzing, and Responding to Sensory Information Through the Language and Skills Unique to the Visual Arts. Students perceive and respond to works of art, objects in nature, events, and the environment. They also use the vocabulary of the visual arts to express their observations.

- Develop Perceptual Skills and Visual Arts Vocabulary
- Analyze Art Elements and Principles of Design

**3.0 Historical and Cultural Context:** Understanding the Historical Contributions and Cultural Dimensions of the Visual Arts.

- Diversity of the Visual Arts

**4.0 Aesthetic Valuing:** Responding to, Analyzing, and Making Judgments About Works in the Visual Arts. Students analyze, assess, and derive meaning from works of art.

- Derive Meaning
- Make Informed Judgments

**5.0 CONNECTIONS, RELATIONSHIPS, APPLICATIONS:** Connecting and Applying What Is Learned in the Visual Arts to Other Art Forms and Subject Areas and to Careers. Students apply what they learn in the visual arts across subject areas.

- Visual Literacy

## GETTING STARTED

To avoid Internet connection problems while teaching, download this PDF and the accompanying PowerPoint presentation for this lesson in advance at <http://www.moca.org/education/teachers>.

### Facilitating sensitive discussions about cultural difference:

Especially when addressing issues of race and identity, it's important to help students practice conversing in a respectful and compassionate manner. Often students reflect larger cultural attitudes and phrasing in their comments, unaware that some may find them hurtful.

"Fostering Civil Discourse" by Facing History and Ourselves is an excellent resource for educators on how to conduct safe and brave discussions about difference in the classroom. [http://info.facinghistory.org/civil\\_discourse](http://info.facinghistory.org/civil_discourse)

Their guidelines include pointers on:

- modeling constructive discourse by identifying teachers' own strongly held beliefs;
- developing a reflective classroom community that represents a 'microcosm of democracy';
- collaboratively creating a classroom contract that establishes shared norms for respectful discourse; and
- providing opportunities for student reflection through writing, discussion, and other activities.

### Guidelines for successful discussion in general:

The questions included in this guide are open-ended and designed to encourage multiple, divergent responses from students. Here are a few pointers that can help set the stage for successful discussions:

- Before the lesson, let students know you'll be looking at some artworks together and that you'll be asking them questions about what they observe and think about the pictures they see.
- Provide time for students to silently take in the work before you ask your first discussion question. This valuable observation and thinking time helps students independently gather their first impressions before sharing begins.

To help "break the ice," after silent looking, you may want to have students talk quietly in pairs before opening the conversation to the whole group. In order to create an environment where students feel free to share their ideas, try to receive each comment neutrally and paraphrase student responses to confirm your understanding as well as offer validation.

## IMAGES AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

(included in the accompanying PowerPoint presentation: <http://www.moca.org/education/teachers>)

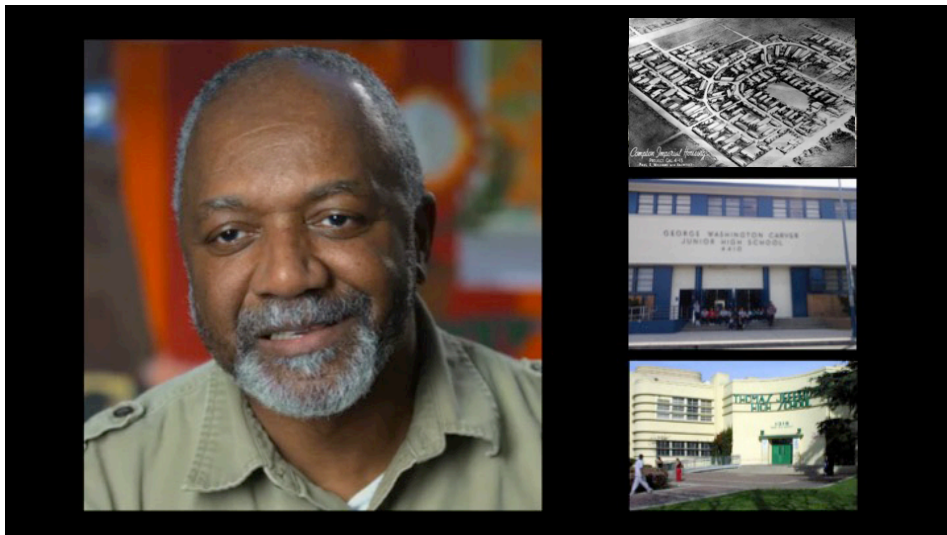


Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Painter)*, 2009, acrylic on PVC, 44 5/8 x 43 1/8 x 3 7/8 in., collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, gift of Katherine S. Schamberg by exchange, photo by Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago

*Teachers: Please see the accompanying PDF for more background information about Kerry James Marshall, tips for successful classroom discussions, and more. (<http://www.moca.org/education/teachers>)*

In this lesson, we will be looking at and discussing artwork by the painter Kerry James Marshall. We'll start with some background information about the artist and his subject matter, and then we'll launch into several exploratory discussions about his works.

When we get to that point, I hope you'll share your ideas about what you're seeing and thinking. Your contributions, as well as your careful listening to others' comments, will help us have rich and meaningful discussions about the artist's work. Together, we can create richer understandings than we can by ourselves. Thank you in advance for your contributions!



Video still from "Kerry James Marshall: MASTRY," the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2016  
Compton Imperial Housing Project, Los Angeles, CA, architect's rendering. Herald Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library  
Photo by carver4th, <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-780953>  
Photo from LA Streamlined, <http://www.sjsu.edu/faculty/wooda/lastreamline/>

Kerry James Marshall is a Chicago-based painter with important ties to Los Angeles. Marshall was born in Birmingham, Alabama and moved to South Los Angeles in 1963 when he was eight years old. He first lived in Nickerson Gardens, a large public housing development, in Watts and attended LAUSD schools Carver Junior High (now Carver Middle School) and Jefferson High School.





Artworks by Kerry James Marshall (clockwise from top left):

*De Style*, 1993, acrylic and collage on canvas 104 x 122 in., Los Angeles County Museum of Art, purchased with funds provided by Ruth and Jacob Bloom, purchased with funds provided by Ruth and Jacob Bloom, digital image © 2015 Museum Associates / LACMA, licensed by Art Resource, NY.

*Untitled (Studio)*, 2014, acrylic on PVC panel 83 1/2 x 118 7/8 in., lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Foundation Gift, Acquisitions Fund and The Metropolitan Museum of Art Multicultural Audience Development Initiative Gift, 2015, photo courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, London

*Souvenir 1*, 1997, acrylic and glitter on canvas banner, 108 x 157 in., collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Bernice and Kenneth Newberger Fund, photo by Joe Ziolkowski, © MCA Chicago

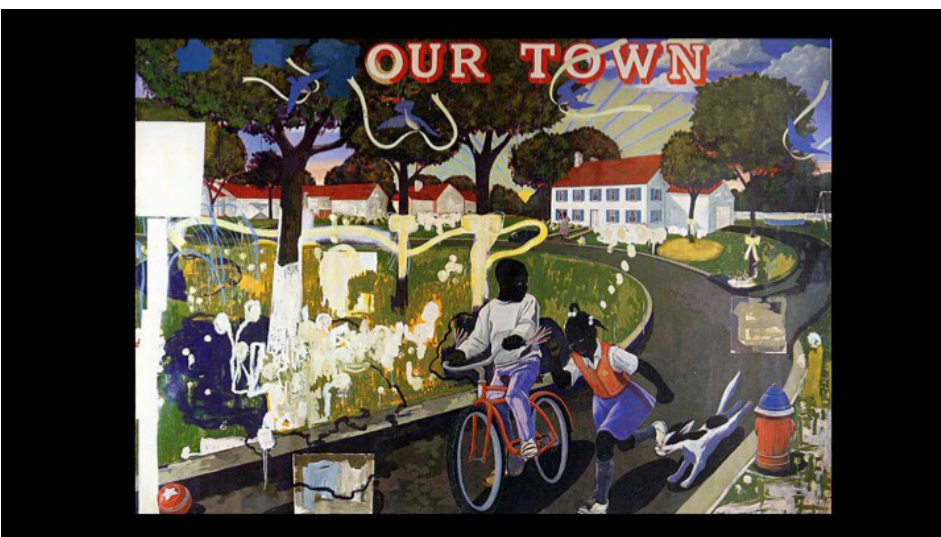
*Many Mansions*, 1994, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 114 x 135 in., The Art Institute of Chicago, Max V. Kohnstamm Fund, photography © The Art Institute of Chicago

Marshall loves museums. However, when he was young, he realized there were very few if any pictures in museums of Black subjects—people who looked like him. He decided to change that. For over 35 years, he has been making paintings that prominently feature black people in portraits, landscapes, interior scenes, and in pictures of historical events.

Through his artwork, Marshall confronts the nearly 600 year history of painting that contains very few painters of African descent and even fewer representations of black people. Marshall decided to include only black figures in his paintings in order to show that black is beautiful and to create a 'new normal' within the long history of painting.

In an interview, Marshall said that he hopes to "put everything that needs to be said in the [art]work." Instead of relying on what other people say about his work, he hopes that people will look at it closely and then draw their own conclusions from it.

So let's look closely at a few works and see what we can find.



*Our Town*, 1995, Acrylic and collage on unstretched canvas, 101 x 143 in., Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas

This is a painting from the series he calls "The Garden Projects."

Let's take a few moments to look silently at this picture.

What's going on in this picture?

*To break the ice, you may want to have students first talk in pairs before opening up the discussion to the whole class.*

*Point to details as students identify them. When interpretive comments are made, gently urge students to explain their thinking by asking: What did you see that makes you say that?*

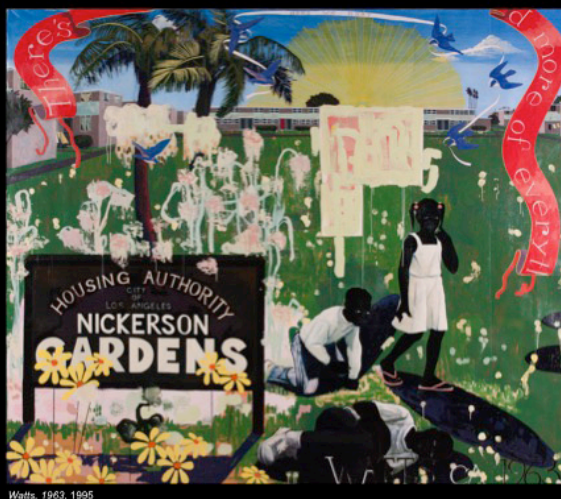
“When people moved into the projects in the 60s they really were sort of idyllic places. They were great places to be. People really wanted to be in the projects back then...Back then, you cut the grass in front of your building, your house. You used to go to the office that was run by the housing authority. You could rent a lawn mower, rent an edger. You could rent tools, clippers, and all that stuff and you cut your own grass...There was even a toy library. You could check out a toy, play with it for a week and return it in exchange for a new one.”

In the following slides, we hear Kerry James Marshall speaking about the public housing project where he grew up.

*“Popcorn” this slide: have one student start reading and then another student continue as needed.*

“...The first...body of paintings I made was the ‘Garden Projects’ when I was living near Stateway Gardens and Wentworth Gardens here in Chicago—public housing projects that had been built with utopian notions of beauty and good living in mind, but were unable to maintain the promise of their pastoral-sounding names.”

“The Figure Remains Essentially Black in Every Circumstance”: Kerry James Marshall Previews His Master Paintings at MCA Chicago, *Culture Type*, May 2, 2016.



Watts, 1963, 1995. Acrylic and collage on unstretched canvas, 115 3/8 x 135 7/8 in. (293.1 x 345.1 cm), Saint Louis Art Museum, Museum Minority Artists Purchase Fund

Here's another painting from the same series. This is a painting of Nickerson Gardens, the public housing development that Marshall first lived in when he moved to Los Angeles in 1963.

We can hear how Marshall has mixed feelings about where he grew up: when housing complexes like his first opened, they were often wonderful place to live, but since then, many have been severely neglected and become very difficult places to live and feel safe.

What might we know about this place by looking at this picture and hearing what the artist has said about his childhood home?





Kerry James Marshall, *Past Times*, 1997



Claude Monet, *On the Bank of the Seine, Bennecourt*, 1868

Left to right: Kerry James Marshall, *Past Times*, 1997, acrylic and collage on canvas 114 x 156 in., Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority, McCormick Place Art Collection, photo by Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago; Claude Monet, *On the Bank of the Seine, Bennecourt*, 1868; Oil on canvas; 32 1/16 x 39 5/8 in. (81.5 x 100.7 cm); The Art Institute of Chicago, Potter Palmer Collection, 1922.427

Kerry James Marshall often employs painting techniques and themes found in European art history. The painting on the right was made by French Impressionist painter Claude Monet in 1868, approximately 130 years before Marshall's painting on the left.

*Give students a minute to look silently at the images, then ask:*

How are these works similar to one another? How are they different?

What elements has Marshall "borrowed" from the painting on the right? How has he changed them?

Here's an example of Marshall's portrait painting, several of which feature black female artists painting.

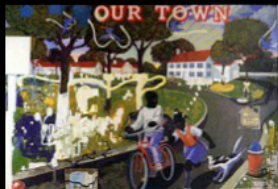
What's going on in this picture?  
What more can we find?



*Untitled*, 2009, acrylic on PVC panel, 61 1/8 x 72 7/8 in. (155.3 x 185.1 cm), Yale University Art Gallery, Purchases with the Janet and Simeon Brauin Fund and a gift from Jacqueline L. Bradley, B.A. 1979

Based on what we have seen and heard from the artist, how would you describe Kerry James Marshall's artwork?

Thank you for your careful looking and contributions to the discussion!



*Our Town*, 1995



*Past Times*, 1997



*Untitled*, 1995

Left to right: *Our Town*, 1995, Acrylic and collage on unstretched canvas, 101 x 143 in., Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas; *Past Times*, 1997, acrylic and collage on canvas 114 x 156 in., Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Authority, McCormick Place Art Collection, photo by Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago; *Untitled*, 2009, acrylic on PVC panel, 61 1/8 x 72 7/8 in. (155.3 x 185.1 cm), Yale University Art Gallery, Purchases with the Janet and Simeon Brauin Fund and a gift from Jacqueline L. Bradley, B.A. 1979



## OPTIONAL LESSON EXTENSIONS

Write a letter to the artist. How would you describe your understanding of his work? What might you like to ask him?

Optional writing prompt

Select one of the images in this presentation to write about.

What did you think when you first saw this image? What do you think now after looking at it carefully and discussing it?  
What do you see that makes you say that?

Optional writing prompt

“There’s 500 years of history that’s structured around an ideal of beauty that’s not us [black people] and that’s the place where most of what I do as an artist operates. It’s in that space where you have to recover the capacity to imagine yourself as an ideal and then to figure out ways to project that ideal world in a way that’s competing with everything else that’s there.”

*Recommended for high school students studying art history:*

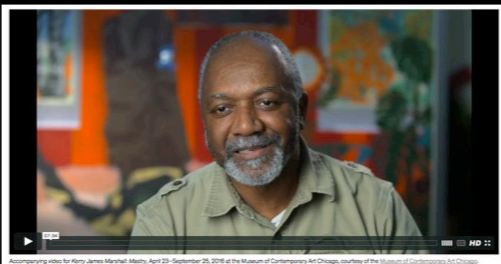
*Ask students to talk in groups of three or four:*

Let’s unpack this statement by the artist. What’s going on in this quote? What do you think he means?

*New York Times Magazine*, Kerry James Marshall in conversation with artist Theaster Gates <https://www.nytimes.com/video/t-magazine/100000004709608/kerry-james-marshall-theaster-gates.html>

### Hear more from the artist

INTERVIEW WITH KERRY JAMES MARSHALL, MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CHICAGO (7:34)



*Recommended for high school students studying art history (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2bmHE7MRQU):*

Let’s hear more from the artist. In this video, Marshall discusses his relationship to Old Masterworks of art history.

Has Marshall’s work changed the way you think about art history? How?

## EXHIBITION AND EDUCATION CREDITS

Classroom Curriculum by Jeanne Hoel, Associate Director of School and Teacher Programs, MOCA.

*Kerry James Marshall: MASTRY* is organized by The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The exhibition was co-curated by Helen Molesworth, Chief Curator, The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Ian Alteveer, Associate Curator, The Metropolitan Museum of Art; and Dieter Roelstraete, Guest Curator for the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

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