

The Modern



ART ASSIGNMENT

WANGECHI MUTU

SEATED WOMAN III

In conjunction with the recent acquisition of Wangechi Mutu's *Seated Woman III*, 2019, the Modern's education department and Desireé Vaniecia are pleased to present this Art Assignment packet for high school and middle school students.

This packet is a supplement to the gallery experience and offers background information on the artist and work, as well as ideas to consider before engaging in the art project.

Wangechi Mutu was born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya, and now divides her time between there and Brooklyn. She created *The Seated III* as part of a four-sculpture commission for the façade of New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art for the exhibition *The New Ones, will free Us*. An edition of *The Seated III* and its mirror image, *The Seated I*, occupied niches facing Fifth Avenue, along with another mirrored pair, *The Seated II* and *The Seated IV*. Each figure is cast in an edition of three. Two of the sculptures have entered the Met's permanent collection, and *The Seated III* takes up her vigil overlooking the Modern's reflecting pond.

The artist's interest in caryatids is centered around the carved bodies of strong women that are incorporated into many traditions of classical African sculpture. They include the royal staffs of the Kingdom of Luba from Central Africa, the holy stools of the Yoruba kings, the figures of mothers in Makonde ritual stools, and many others. The caryatids of African sculpture predate the classical Greek and Roman architectural figures, which are essentially anthropomorphic columns. These particular African caryatids represent the divine female in her role as a central pillar and are symbolic of her responsibility in society. It is these singular caryatids that inspired *The New Ones*, those relieved from their role of eternal weight-bearers.

Mutu rewrites the role of the caryatid. *The Seated III* bears only her own weight and is unattached to the building or any structure around her. She is serene and regal, and her calm extends to her fingers and her expression, which is that of a woman in her rightful place. Her garment is fashioned from sinewy coils that envelop and protect her body, draping around her suggestively like heavy embellishment. Her stretched head refers to the tradition of binding craniums in many ancient high-status individuals, like wealthy women of the Mangbetu, royalty from ancient Kemet, and even rulers of the Aztec and Mayan empires. Those painful and heavy enhancements and alterations were symbols of great status.

Please watch and read the selected videos and texts about Wangechi Mutu. These resources can provide context about the artist before you begin the activities.

Wangechi Mutu, "Artist Interview—Wangechi Mutu, The NewOnes, will free Us," *Met Exhibitions*, 2019

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQgCX7HZoW0>

Wangechi Mutu, "Women and the Critical Eye—A Conversation with the Artist Wangechi Mutu," *The Met*, 2020

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMUFI__m1KI

Wangechi Mutu, "Artist Wangechi Mutu on 'Brilliant Ideas,' Episode 21," *Bloomberg*, 2016

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2016-02-12/artist-wangechi-mutu-on-brilliant-ideas>

Sarah Cascone, "I Didn't Want Her to Carry the Weight': How Wangechi Mutu's African-Inspired Caryatids on the Met's Façade Break Free of Tradition," *artnet news*, 2019

<https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/wangechi-mutu-metropolitan-museum-facade-1662937>

Nancy Princenthal, "Wangechi Mutu: A New Face for the Met," *New York Times*, September 5, 2019

[https://www.gladstonegallery.com/sites/default/files/20190905_WM_NewYorkTimes_Profile_Web\[2\]_0.pdf](https://www.gladstonegallery.com/sites/default/files/20190905_WM_NewYorkTimes_Profile_Web[2]_0.pdf)

Definition, Britannica, "Caryatid"

<https://www.britannica.com/technology/caryatid>

Wangechi Mutu and Carrie Mae Weems, "Wangechi Mutu and Carrie Mae Weems on the Profound Impulse to Make Art," *Interview Magazine*, 2020

<https://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/wangechi-mutu-and-carrie-mae-weems-discuss-the-power-of-creation>

Wangechi Mutu and Deborah Willis, "Wangechi Mutu by Deborah Willis: Oral History Project," *Bomb Magazine*, 2014

<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/wangechi-mutu/>

Wangechi Mutu and Robert Enright, "Resonant Surgeries: The Collaged World of Wangechi Mutu," *Border Crossings*, 2008

<https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/resonant-surgeries-the-collaged-world-of-wangechi-mutu>

Wangechi Mutu and Teju Cole, "Wangechi Mutu: Under the skin of Africa," *The Guardian*, 2014

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/sep/25/wangechi-mutu-artist-interview-africa-snakes-mermaids>



The Seated III, 2019
Bronze
82 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 37 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 33 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches
Collection of the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth,
The Friends of Art Endowment Fund and Museum purchase
© Wangechi Mutu



The Seated III, 2019 (installation views)

ART ASSIGNMENT

OBJECT AND SYMBOL

Wangechi Mutu's work moves between a variety of media, but the use of the feminine subject recurs. Her depictions of the female figure often represent multiple cultural perspectives and are positioned to imply power.

For *Seated III*, Mutu reimaged a symbol common to the history of both Western and African art: the caryatid—a sculpted figure, almost always female, meant to serve as a means of either structural or metaphorical support.

By removing the caryatid from the role of bearing weight, the artist has imbued it with a liberated sense of power.

Think about various symbols that represent power, strength, and greatness in contemporary society.

How do these symbols gain or hold these qualities? Who or what assigns power to symbols?

Do symbols of power, strength, and greatness always represent something positive?

Can symbols require a level of discomfort and/or seem unattainable at times?

For this drawing exercise, first select an object or objects that represent your interpretation of power.

These objects can be something you own or something that other people may have.

Think about the ways your selected objects represent status in contemporary society.

As you consider what to select for your drawing exercise, think about the objects within the following images and how they represent status or provide examples of strength and power.

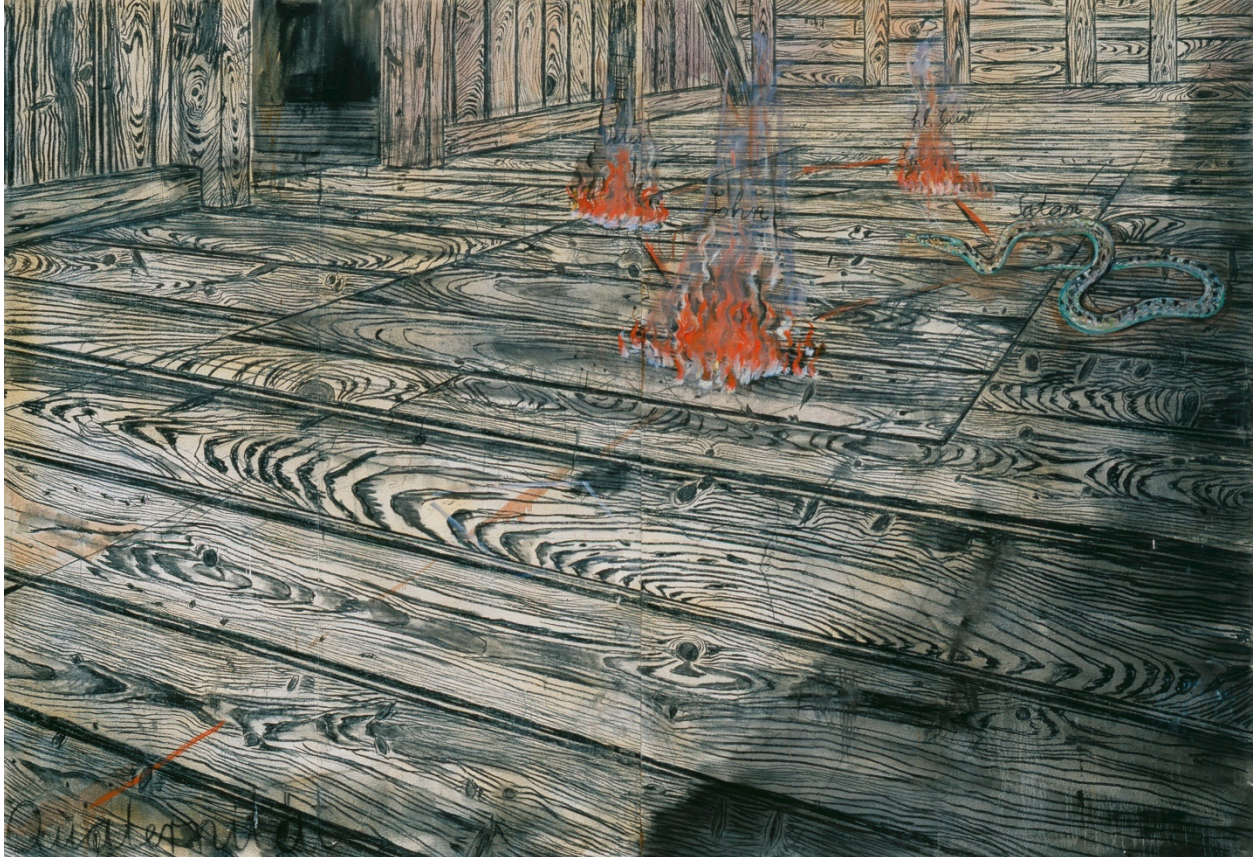
**ART ASSIGNMENT
SUPPLEMENTAL IMAGES**



Candida Hofer
Biblioteca Riccardiana Firenze I 2008, 2008
C-print
97 5/8 x 70 7/8 inches
Museum purchase
© Candida Hofer



KAWS
CLEAN SLATE, 2018
Bronze
20 ³/₄ x 12 x 9 ²/₃ feet
Museum purchase, The Friends of the Art Endowment Fund
© KAWS



Anselm Kiefer
Quaternity, 1973
Oil and charcoal on burlap
117 ½ x 170 ¼ inches
Museum purchase, The Friends of the Art Endowment Fund
© Anselm Kiefer



Sally Mann
The New Mothers, 1989
Gelatin silver print
20 x 24 inches
Museum purchase, made possible by a grant from The Burnett Foundation
© Sally Mann



Cornelia Parker

Rorschach (Endless Column 1), 2005

Fourteen silver-plated objects crushed by 250-ton industrial press, metal wire

1/4 x 162 x 19 inches

Gift of the Director's Council and Museum purchase, 2006

© Cornelia Parker



Laurie Simmons
Walking House, 1989
Pigment print
83 ½ x 47 ½ inches
Museum purchase, The Friends of the Art Endowment Fund
© Laurie Simmons



Laurie Simmons
2017: *The Mess*, 2017
Pigment print
58 x 240 inches
Museum purchase
© Laurie Simmons



Kehinde Wiley
Colonel Platoff on his Charger, 2007
Oil on canvas
108 x 108 inches
Gift of the Director's Council and Museum purchase, 2008
© Kehinde Wiley

ART ASSIGNMENT DRAWING RESPONSE

Have you found your objects yet?

If you need additional help, think about your family and things you are surrounded by.

Finishing the sentences below could help you home in on something to select.

1. My mother thinks that a _____ holds power
because _____.
2. My sister thinks that a _____ holds power
because _____.
3. My aunt thinks that a _____ holds power
because _____.
4. My grandmother thinks that a _____ holds power
because _____.

Once you've selected your objects, let's begin a drawing exercise.

Using pencil or pen and the blank gallery templates at the end of the PDF packet, draw your objects isolated in those spaces as if they were presented in a gallery or museum.

You can print the templates out and draw on the image directly or take your drawing from another piece of paper and collage it onto the blank gallery spaces.

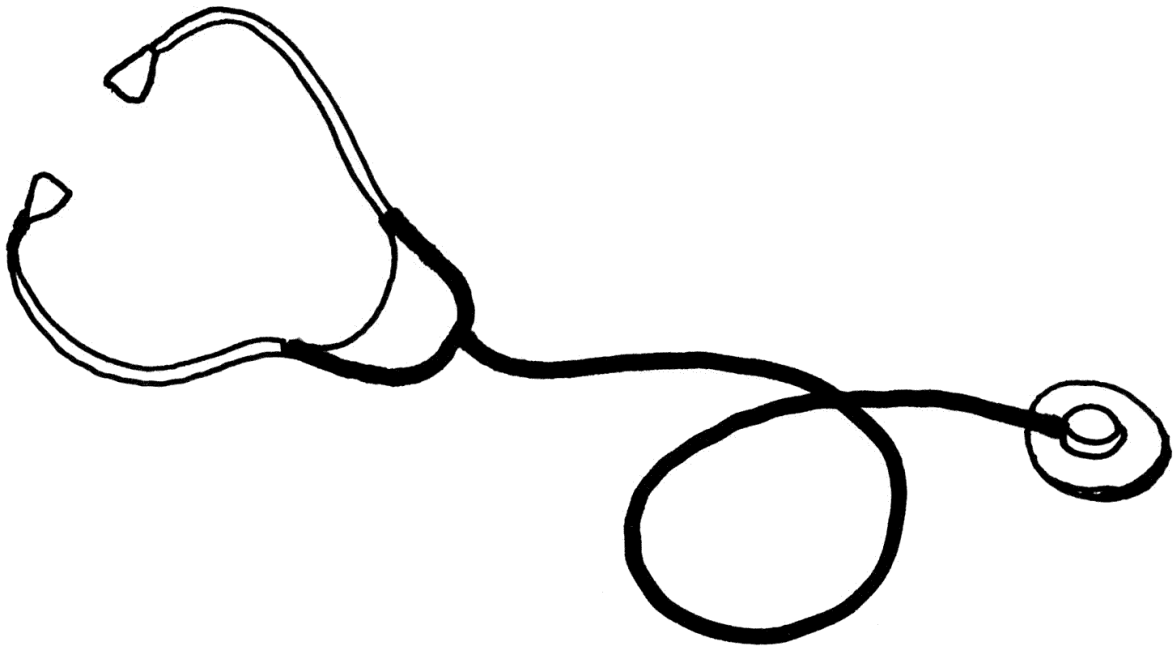
EXAMPLE 1:

My mother thinks that a *HOME* holds power because *IT REPRESENTS STABILITY FOR A FAMILY.*



EXAMPLE 2:

My sister thinks that a *STETHOSCOPE* holds power because *IT REMINDS HER THAT OUR BODIES ARE AGING.*



EXAMPLE 3:

My grandmother thinks that *PAIN RELIEVERS* hold power because *THEY MAKE HER HANDS NIMBLER.*









ART ASSIGNMENT DRAWING TEMPLATES

The following pages include image templates for you to print out and draw on. Although these images are meant to be used in “landscape” orientation, they are embedded in “portrait” orientation to maximize image size.









Thank you for participating in this Art Assignment by Desireé Vaniecia for Wangechi Mutu's *The Seated III*, 2019, at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth.

Desireé Vaniecia was born in 1990 in Dallas, Texas. She received her BA in Graphic Design from McMurry University. She currently lives and works as an artist and educator in Dallas.

Vaniecia is best known for her portraiture and experimentation with displaying the female persona. Her images often have facial expressions and anatomical details reduced and neutral, emphasizing the female and her gestures.

The Dallas Museum of Art awarded The Arch and Anne Giles Kimbrough Fund to Vaniecia in 2020, and The City of Dallas awarded her the Arts Activate Grant in 2019. Her work has been in publications such as *Glasstire*, *KERA*, and *The Dallas Morning News*.

<https://www.desireevaniecia.com>

If you have any questions about this Art Assignment, please contact Assistant Curator of Education (Academic Programs) Jesse Morgan Barnett at jbarnett@themodern.org.