



EMBRACING OUR DIFFERENCES  
AT TheRingling

WOMEN IN THE ARTS

2024-2025

## INTRODUCTION

This guide produced by The Ringling Museum has been designed to complement the Embracing Our Differences curriculum. It highlights issues of identity injustice, personal responsibility, conflict, and compassion through a selection of artworks that encourage students to think about and grapple with the historic portrayal and role of women in the arts.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the conclusion of this teacher-guided tour, students will:

- Discuss the messages represented in each work of art and how those messages may be relevant to their own lives
- Understand the ways women have historically been portrayed and excluded from art, and what impact that has on the human experience today
- Engage with a variety of objects in The Ringling collection, building visual literacy and social-emotional learning skills

## USING THE GUIDE

In today's society, open and honest dialogue between individuals is more important than ever. We can foster social cohesion by inspiring dialogue that supports the development of a civil society, from its smallest unit—the individual—outward to the family, the school, the community, the nation, and the world.

This guide has been created in a modular form. There are three thematic modules **Stand Up: Stories of Courage**, **A Seat at the Table**, and **Women on Display: Objectified Bodies**, each which includes 3 works of art related to that theme. For each artwork, you will find a summary of its meaning, suggested discussion points, and an extension activity if you want to continue the conversation.

You do not need to follow any particular order when viewing these objects. Each thematic module can be adapted for any grade level, although the suggested guidelines and topics listed for each object may be helpful in selecting the right works for your group.

■ **STAND UP: STORIES OF COURAGE** | Elementary

■ **A SEAT AT THE TABLE** | Middle

■ **WOMEN ON DISPLAY: OBJECTIFIED BODIES** | High

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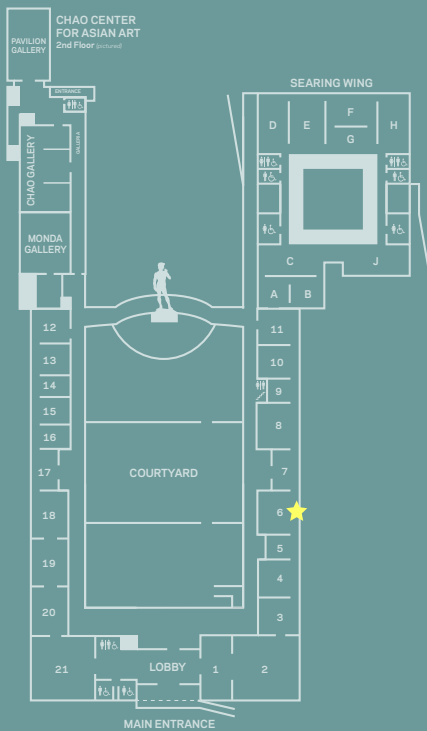


Gallery 6

Antonio Negretti (Antonio Palma) (Italian, 1515-1574), *Esther before Ahasuerus*, 1574. Oil on canvas, 67 x 123 in. Bequest of John Ringling, 1936. SN85

*“You must never be fearful about what you are doing when it is right.”*

– Rosa Parks



**ANTONIO NEGRETTI, *ESTHER BEFORE AHASUERUS***

**BACKGROUND**

This painting tells the story of Esther, who heroically saved her people, the Jews, from certain destruction. Esther was married to the Persian king Ahasuerus (pronounced AY-haz-yoo-EER-uhs), who didn't know about Esther's Jewish ancestry. When Ahasuerus signed a law that would massacre all Jewish people, Esther knew she had to stand up for her people. Here we see Esther begging for her people's lives. Moved by her compassion, Ahasuerus reversed the decree to massacre the Jews. Esther saved her people by standing up for what she believed in.

**DISCUSSION POINTS**

There's a lot going on in this painting! Let's figure out the story we see here.

- Who do you think is the most important person in this painting? Why do you think that?
- What is happening in the background? How does that scene build the tension for what is happening with Esther and Ahasuerus?

Standing up for what's right when there are dangerous consequences can be frightening and overwhelming. Esther summoned incredible courage by begging the king to save her people. If the king had been insulted by Esther's request, not only would Esther lose her life, but all of her friends, family, and entire community would die as well.

- Imagine a time you had to show a lot of courage. What did that feel like?
- What support can you give your friends and family when they need to be brave?

Rosa Parks was a civil rights activist who deliberately broke racist laws, putting herself in danger, in order to make change. Parks said "you must never be fearful about what you are doing when it is right." How was Esther's decision the "right" one? How does this painting show her overcoming her fear?

Esther could have chosen to live the rest of her life safe in the king's palace, pretending she wasn't Jewish.

- What consequences would that decision have for Esther?
- Why do you think Esther made the decision she did—to stand up for herself and her community?

**LEARNING EXTENSION**

Acting out a painting is a great way to understand what all the characters are doing and feeling. Assign each student to a figure in the painting and ask them to pose like the painting. Make sure each student is at least 3 feet from the wall when acting out the painting. Ask students:

- How does it feel to be in this position?
- What is your character doing? Feeling? Going to do next?

## ROSA BONHEUR, *PLOWING IN THE NIVERNAIS* (*LABOURAGES NIVERNAIS*)

### BACKGROUND

This tranquil scene of oxen plowing a fertile landscape shows us the virtues of hard work and country life. The artist, Rosa Bonheur, was one of the leading animal painters of the 19th century, and intimately studied the natural landscape and the anatomy of animals on farms. As a woman, Bonheur faced several difficulties during her career despite her standing as an illustrious and successful artist. Bonheur studied animals in traditionally male spaces such as farms, auctions, and slaughterhouses. She also attained police permission to dress in man's clothing, highly unconventional and widely disdained at the time. Rosa Bonheur stood up for her right to be an artist, to work instead of getting married, and to wear what she wanted.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

This painting is very lifelike! Let's look closely to see what we can discover about the painting.

- How many oxen can you find? How many working men?
- What actions are taking place in this painting? What work is being accomplished?

Rosa Bonheur was made fun of and bullied for the way she dressed. Due to her work studying animals outdoors and also due to her personal preferences, Bonheur chose to dress in men's clothing and even had to obtain police permission to ditch the dress and wear pants.

- How do you think Rosa Bonheur felt when she was teased for the dressing in a way that felt right to her?
- How did Rosa Bonheur demonstrate bravery by wearing what she was comfortable wearing?
- Nowadays, people can wear whatever they want without being punished by the government. How would it feel to be told what you can and cannot wear every day?
- If you saw someone being bullied for the way they dress, what could you do to be an upstander instead of a bystander?

### LEARNING EXTENSION

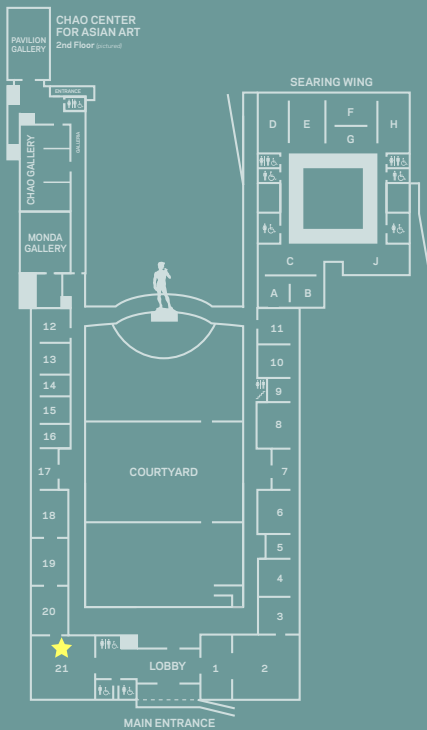
Back in the classroom, challenge students to research 5 women artists and their work. Explain why each artist was influential and find three works of art by each artist.

Join the conversation online this March with #5womenartists—an initiative by the National Museum of Women in the Arts that calls attention to the underrepresentation women have in the art world, and seeks to address that by asking the question, can you name #5womenartists?



### Gallery 21

Rosa Bonheur (French, 1822-1899), *Plowing in the Nivernais (Labourages Nivernais)*, 1850. Oil on canvas, 52 1/2 x 102 in. Bequest of John Ringling, 1936. SN433



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## MISHIMA KIMIYO, UNTITLED (CRUMPLED NEWSPAPER, AND CRUSHED ASAHI BEER BOX)

### BACKGROUND

Mishima Kimiyo is a groundbreaking artist from Japan. She uses her art to call attention to an issue that is important to her – garbage and pollution from overpopulated urban areas. Mishima (her last name) creates delicately folded and creased ceramic works which she glazes and paints to resemble crumpled newspapers, cardboard boxes, and other discarded items. By focusing on trash, Mishima asks her viewer to consider their own relationship with waste and question what we all can do to better care for planet Earth.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

Mishima Kimiyo is a woman artist in a largely male world – women ceramic artists are just beginning to get the recognition they deserve.

- What obstacles do you think women like Mishima Kimiyo have to overcome in a male-dominated field?
- How might men and other allies support the work of women artists?
- This exhibition shows important ceramic works of art by artists who happen to be women. How does it feel to be surrounded by only women artists? What feelings did you have in the European collection whose artwork is only by men artists?

Mishima Kimiyo uses her art to call attention to a matter important to her – too much wasteful garbage.

- What message do you think the artist is telling you through her art?
- How does Mishima use her art to show her courage?
- What are some ways you can show bravery and courage when caring for the environment?

### LEARNING EXTENSION

*Radical Clay: Contemporary Women Artists from Japan* is an exhibition of incredible ceramic artists – all of whom happen to be women. Spend 5 minutes looking at other works in this gallery.

- Ask students to slowly move through the space and stand in front of a work of art they find interesting.
- Think about the woman who created the artwork you are standing in front of. How did she make it? What do you think she was feeling or thinking when she created this piece?
- For a long time, women in Japan were not allowed to be artists. What message does this exhibition of only women artists send? Do you think exhibitions focused on gender are still important? Why or why not?

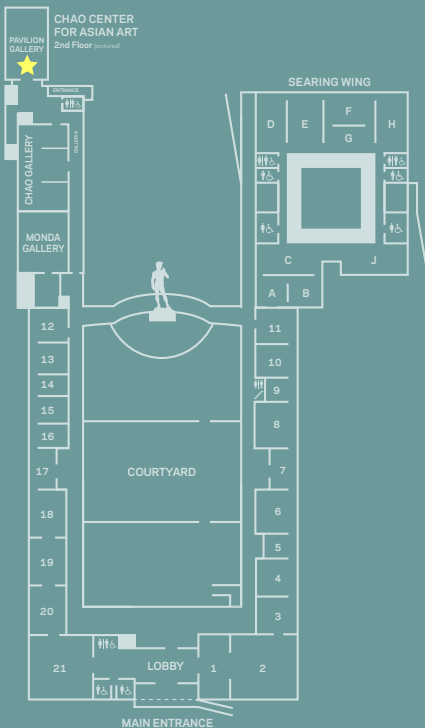


### Pavilion Gallery

Mishima Kimiyo (Japanese, born 1932), *Untitled (Crumpled Newspaper)*, ca. 1981. Porcelain. On loan from Carol and Jeffrey Horvitz.

*“Yes, my work is garbage.”*

– Mishima Kimiyo



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## ALFRED STEVENS A PORTRAIT GROUP OF PARISIAN CELEBRITIES

### BACKGROUND

This painting is just one piece of a larger mural created for the world's fair held in Paris in 1889. It included all of the most important celebrities and public figures of the previous century. After the close of the fair, the large mural was divided into sections and dispersed. This section includes celebrities from the literary and performing arts, including the actress Sarah Bernhardt, who is wearing the white costume of one of the queen characters she played.



### Gallery 21

Alfred Stevens (Belgian, 1823-1906), *A Portrait Group of Parisian Celebrities* (detail), c. 1889. Oil on canvas, 92 3/4 x 96 3/4 in. Bequest of John Ringling, 1936. SN439

### DISCUSSION POINTS

Looking at the details and people in this painting can tell us a lot about what and who was considered important when it was made.

- How many different personalities seem to be represented here? Who seems the most intimidating? The most aloof? The friendliest?
- What are you using to make these judgements? What can't we know about these people just from looking at them?
- Who is missing from this painting? What does that tell you about the structure of 19th century French society?
- There are three women in this painting, the prominent actress Sarah Bernhardt (in white), Juliette Adam, novelist (in red), and an unknown woman (in blue). Why are there so few women? How do you think this representation changes in a group of politicians or lawyers?

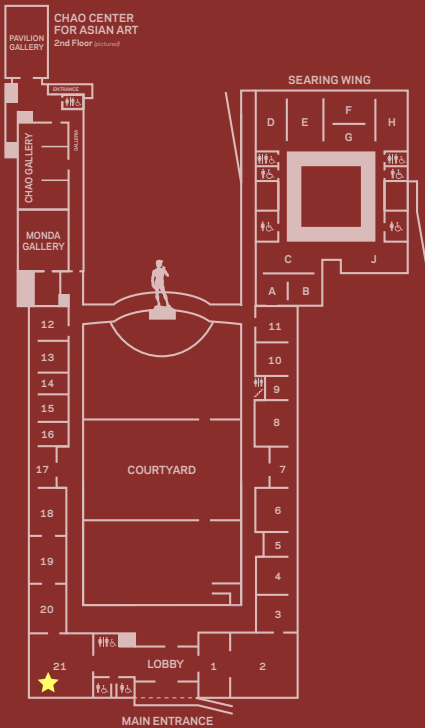
Shirley Chisholm was the first African American woman in Congress (elected 1968). She was also the first African American and woman to run for the presidential nomination for one of the two major political parties (for general election, 1972). Chisholm was a strong advocate for women's and civil rights.

- When Chisholm said "If they don't offer you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair," what did she mean?
- How does this quote apply to experiences you have had? What does it feel like to not be offered a seat at the table?

### LEARNING EXTENSION

Discuss some of the ways people experience discrimination and exclusion.

- What are some of the dangers of not being represented?
- How does it feel to be excluded from something? What can you do to make sure others around you do not experience exclusion or discrimination?



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## TSUBOI ASUKA, CHINESE-BROCADE ANCIENT SKIRT

### BACKGROUND

Tsuboi Asuka is one of Japan's most influential ceramic artists. She creates sculptures out of clay, highly decorated with intricate patterns, glazes (minerals applied to clay to give it color and shine), and gilding (applying a thin layer of metal to the surface). Tsuboi was an early woman artist who paved the way for future generations of women artists, many who are included in this gallery. She co-founded Joryū Tōgei (Women's Association of Ceramic Art) in 1957 to support other women artists. Joryū Tōgei continues to host women-only exhibitions in Japan annually today.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

This work of art is shaped like a traditional skirt worn by women for hundreds of years in Japan. The design is called Chinese-Brocade, as it originally was developed in China before being brought over to Japan.

- Imagine wearing a skirt like this. Would you find it comfortable?
- Women's dress is highly regulated. What rules are put on women by dictating what they can wear? What do those rules communicate to you?
- Tsuboi created this skirt out of clay. Traditionally, women in Japan could weave fabric and create clothing but could not create in clay. What message do you think Tsuboi is sending by creating a traditionally women medium (textiles) in a traditionally male medium (clay)?

Tsuboi Asuka was a pioneer – she paved the way for generations of women ceramic artists to come. In 1957, she co-founded Joryū Tōgei, a women's only ceramic artist association.

- What professions have traditionally been held by men? By women?
- Why might professions have traditionally excluded a group of people based on their gender?
- How is separation of men's jobs and women's jobs being changed and challenged today? How is Tsuboi Asuka contributing to this change?
- Think of some examples from your own life when you were criticized for doing something or liking something from what society might call "the wrong gender." What lessons can you learn from Tsuboi Asuka?

### LEARNING EXTENSION

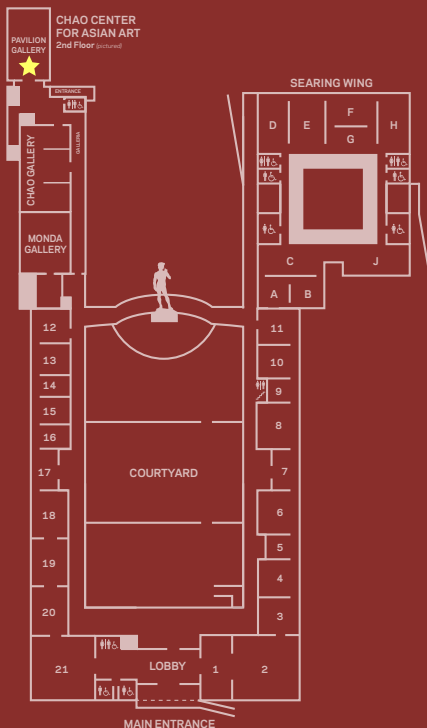
*Radical Clay: Contemporary Women Artists from Japan* is an exhibition of incredible ceramic artists – all of whom happen to be women. Spend 5 minutes looking at other works in this gallery and find an artist who was born after Tsuboi Asuka (born 1932).

- How does this artist's style differ from the style of Tsuboi Asuka? Think of three differences.
- How is this artist similar to Tsuboi Asuka? Think of three similarities.
- What lesson might a younger artist learn from a trailblazer like Tsuboi Asuka? What lessons might her story have for you?



### Pavilion Gallery

Tsuboi Asuka (Japanese, born 1932),  
*Chinese-Brocade Ancient Skirt*, 2017.  
Stoneware in gold and silver glaze.  
On loan from Carol and Jeffrey Horvitz.



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## MICKALENE THOMAS, *AIN'T I A WOMAN? (SANDRA)*

### BACKGROUND

Mickalene Thomas is a leading contemporary artist. The model for this work is Thomas's mother, Sandra. Mickalene Thomas carefully arranged the scene, angle, and look of this work of art which includes a video of Thomas's mother seated on a couch and a mixed media portrait. The soundtrack is Eartha Kitt's "A Woman Wouldn't be a Woman," a popular 1950s song encapsulating mid-century gender expectations. Thomas made her own path and supports women artists. She co-founded The Josie Club, a social impact group created to support Black Queer Femme and Women, such as Mickalene Thomas herself, to lift others up and support similar women artists.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

The title of this artwork, *Ain't I a Woman?*, references a speech given by Sojourner Truth at the Women's Convention in Akron, OH in 1851, in response to the exclusively white women's movement of the time. Sojourner Truth was born into slavery and became a well known anti-slavery and pro-women's rights speaker after gaining her freedom.

- How does this question really ask? What was Sojourner Truth getting at with her question?
- Why do you think Mickalene Thomas used this famous quote as the title of this work of art? What do you see that makes you think that?

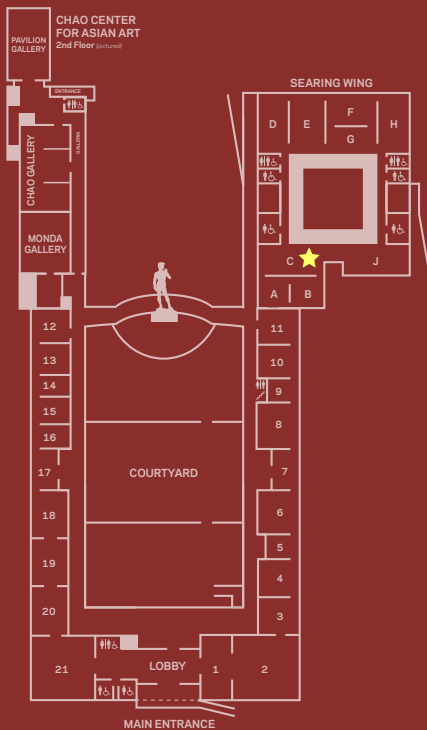
The model in this work of art is the artist's mother, Sandra.

- How do you relate (or not) to the model in this work?
- What type of person do you think Sandra is?
- Why do you think Mickalene Thomas included her own mother in this work?



### Searing Wing, Gallery C

Mickalene Thomas (American, born 1971), *Ain't I a Woman (Sandra)*, 2009. Mixed media. Museum purchase, 2011. SN11295.



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### LEARNING EXTENSION

Searing Wing, Gallery C

Joy Korman (American, 20th-21st century), *Mother/Daughter*, 1995. Oil on canvas. Foundation purchase with funds provided by Mr. and Mrs. Jay Crouse, the John E. Galvin Charitable Trust, and The Ringling Museum of Art Investment Trust Fund, 1996. MF96.6.

The exhibition *Embodied: Highlights from The Ringling Collection of Modern and Contemporary Art* features works of art that express the figure, or the human body. In this work, the human body is implied through two hanging dresses.

Titled *Mother/Daughter*, artist Joy Korman invites us to imagine the people who wear these dresses and, like Mickalene Thomas, consider the relationship between a mother and a daughter.

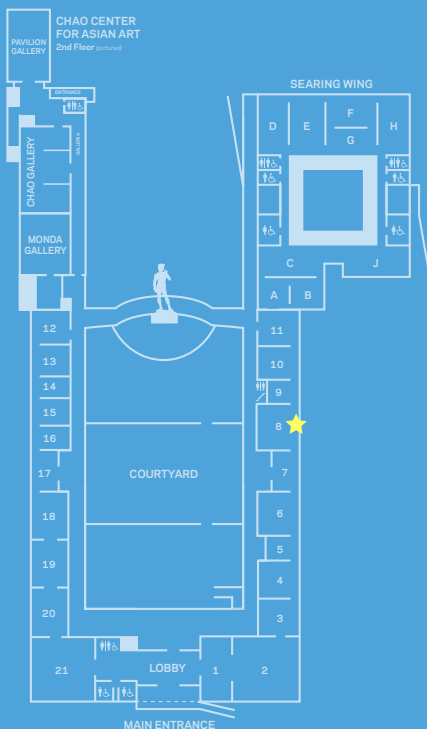
- How is this work of art similar to or different from the work by Mickalene Thomas?
- How would you describe the relationship between the two implied figures?
- How is Korman using color to communicate with the viewer? What do you think the significance is of the simple black and white color palette?





## Gallery 8

Sisto Badalocchio (Italian, 1585-1619),  
*Susannah and the Elders*, ca. 1602-1610.  
Oil on canvas, 63 15/16 x 43 7/8 in.  
Bequest of John Ringling, 1936. SN111



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Throughout history, women's bodies have often been the subject of artwork – most of which was created by male artists for male audiences. In art, we call that the “male gaze.” When women's bodies are put on display by an artist does that mean the woman is objectified? How do you decide if an artwork is celebrating the female body or exploiting it?

## SISTO BADALOCCHIO, *SUSANNAH AND THE ELDERS*

### BACKGROUND

This is a story of blackmail. Susannah thinks she is alone taking a bath when two male elders appear and try to coerce her into sexual relations. They tell her that unless she gives into them, they will spread a lie that they saw her with a young lover who was not her husband, a crime which carried the death penalty. Susannah is faced with a dangerous choice and chooses righteousness. It is only after the elders are cross-examined separately that they are exposed as liars and Susannah is saved.

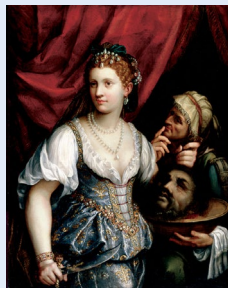
### DISCUSSION POINTS

This story was a popular subject for Baroque artists ostensibly because Susannah was a heroine who symbolized justice, righteousness, and loyalty. However, was her story was used by artists as a pretext for depicting a young, attractive, nude female body?

- How is the story depicted in the painting?
- Do you think the artist wants us to feel sympathetic to Susannah? Why or why not?

Though this painting was made in the early 17th century, it still resonates with us today, though perhaps in a different way than the artist and original audience anticipated. Today, sexual harassment is being challenged and confronted like never before.

- How do you interpret this painting today? How might your interpretation differ from the historical context of the painting?



### LEARNING EXTENSION

Gallery 8

Fede Galizia (Italian, 1578-1630), *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*, 1596. Oil on canvas, 47 1/2 x 37 in. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Polak, 1969. SN684

Compare *Susannah and the Elders* with the painting of the heroine Judith by artist Fede Galizia to the left. In this Old Testament story, Assyrian general Holofernes became enamored with the beautiful widow Judith. She seduced him, and then used his own sword to decapitate him. In doing so, she saved her town from being destroyed by Holofernes and his army.

Judith was considered a hero, even though she committed an act of adultery and murder. How are judgments passed on Susannah and Judith different? How does consent and power dynamics play into these stories?

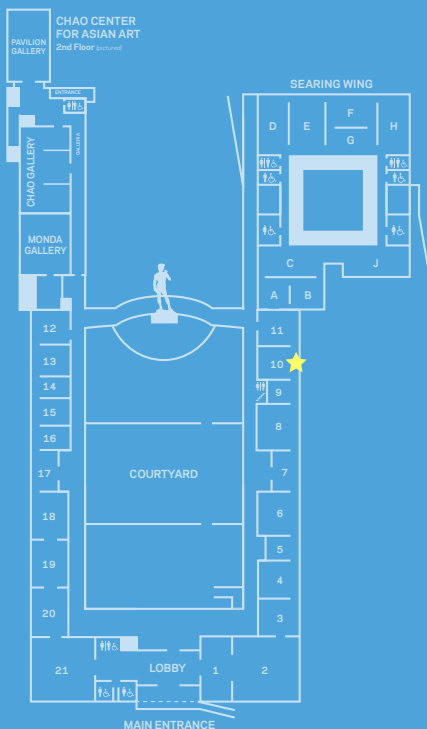


## Gallery 10

Giuseppe Ghezzi (Italian, 1634–1721),  
*Judgment of Paris*, c. 1690s. Oil on canvas,  
68 x 96 1/2 in. Museum purchase, 1998.  
SN11033

*“I think of my body as a tool  
to do the stuff I need to do,  
but not the be all end all of  
my existence.”*

– Lena Dunham



## GIUSEPPE GHEZZI, *JUDGMENT OF PARIS*

### BACKGROUND

The Judgment of Paris tells how the Trojan War started. When the goddess of discord, Eris, tossed a golden apple to the gods as a gift for the fairest of them all, three goddesses claimed the prize. The gods couldn't decide which goddess was most lovely, so they asked Paris, a Trojan prince raised by shepherds to judge the beauty competition—an impossible task. Each goddess attempted to bribe Paris into choosing her: Aphrodite offered Paris the love of Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world. Athena promised Paris valor and victory in battle, while Hera the Queen of the gods offered Paris riches. Paris chose Aphrodite, and his conquest of Helen (who was married to the Greek king Menelaos) sparked the 10-year war between the Greeks and the Trojans.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

Three goddesses wished to be considered the most beautiful of them all and attempted to bribe Paris into choosing them.

- Why do you think the goddesses bribed Paris? If this is a beauty competition, what do they stand to gain by bribing the judge?
- Why do you think the artist is showing the goddesses undressing? How does this contribute to the story being told? How are their bodies being used to determine their worth?
- What are your thoughts on the winning bribe? How do you think Helen, who was already married, might have felt about the arrangement?



### LEARNING EXTENSION

#### Gallery 10

Attributed to Juan Bautista Maíno (Spanish, 1581–1649), *Narcissus*, c. 1600–10. Oil on canvas, 45 x 56 3/8 in. Museum purchase, 1969. SN885

This painting tells the story of Narcissus, a beautiful young man who was desired by all. When he

spurned the advances of the nymph Echo, she became heartbroken and wasted away until only her voice was left. To punish him for his cruelty, Nemesis, the goddess of revenge, led Narcissus to a clear pool where he fell in love with his own reflection. Narcissus pined away after his own image until he died, and his body was transformed into the white narcissus flower.

Men, women, and nymphs all fell in love with Narcissus for his great beauty. Homosexuality was a normal aspect of Greek life—many men took male lovers before marrying a woman and starting a family.

- Depicting women's bodies in art as objects of sexual desire for male audiences is called the male gaze. In what ways do we see them male gaze extended upon Narcissus? Would you say his body is being objectified?

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## MATSUDA YURIKO, *IN HER SHOES*

### BACKGROUND

Matsuda Yuriko is one of the artists featured in the exhibition *Radical Clay: Contemporary Women Artists from Japan*—an exhibition which features 36 incredible ceramic artists, all of whom happen to be women. Matsuda (her last name) creates provocative and beautiful enameled ceramic pieces, often molded after female body parts. Matsuda brings the traditional enameled porcelain tradition which involves carefully painted glaze on the clay surface, and makes it contemporary with pop culture, feminist, and surrealist influences.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

This molded foot both recalls life and parodies it. With a blend of traditional technique and pattern with a pop of surrealism, this object asks us to consider who, or what, is being objectified?

- Underneath an otherwise typical foot, a polka dot banana props up the heel. How does this unexpected element impact the meaning you make from the object?
- Surrealism is an art genre which includes the unconscious and dreams and gives them equal weight as perceived reality. What surrealist elements do you see in this object?
- Why do you think the artist chose to include only the lower leg and foot? What is the significance of the body parts she chose to include? What is the significance of the body parts she chose to exclude?

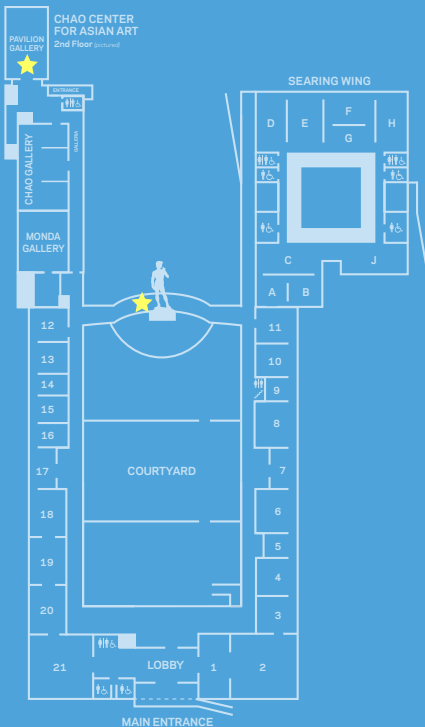
The title of this artwork is *In Her Shoes*, referencing a common western phrase, a variation of which is “don’t judge someone until you walk a mile in their shoes.”

- What do you think the artist is trying to say with the title? What does the title mean to you?
- What can we learn by walking in someone else’s shoes?



### Pavilion Gallery

Matsuda Yuriko (Japanese, born 1943), *In Her Shoes*, 2007. Enameled and glazed porcelain. On loan from Carol and Jeffrey Horvitz.



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### LEARNING EXTENSION

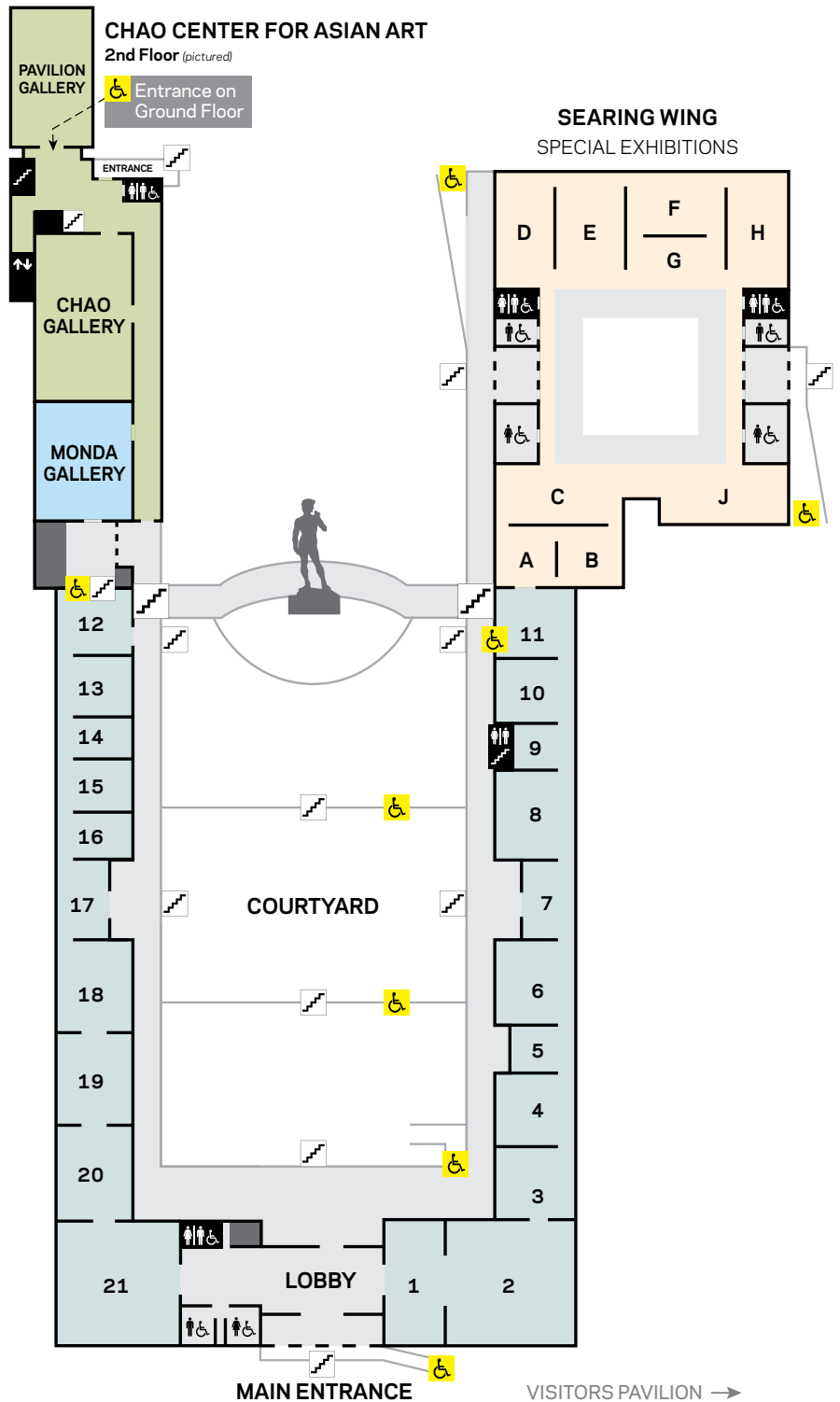
#### Courtyard

Michelangelo (Italian, 1475–1564), cast by Chiurazzi Foundry, *David*, mid 19th–early 20th century. Bronze, 198 3/4 in. Bequest of John Ringling, 1936. SN5466

As you walk around the Museum of Art today, you’ll notice many of the sculptures are nude. John Ringling purchased many sculptures from the Chiurazzi Foundry, an Italian firm with permission to create casts of some of the most famous Hellenistic and Roman statuary. The ancient Greeks and Romans had different customs and societal responses to nudity than we do today.

- Depicting the nude human body was (and still is) considered to be a marker of artistic skill.
- Ancient Greek men exercised nude, so depictions of male athletes are historically accurate.
- What are some ways our society views the human form? How are these conventions and expectations similar to artistic and historic portrayals of the human form you saw at the museum today? How are they different?





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The Ringling is proud to partner with Embracing Our Differences to advance conversations about issues of diversity and inclusion through the transformative power of the arts.