Kim Chong Hak: Painter of Seoraksan

"I love the seasons—spring, summer, autumn, winter. I love them for what they are and for the idea they evoke, that of permanent change. They embody life, renewal, energy."

—Kim Chong Hak

Teacher Resource

This teacher resource can be used to prepare students for their visit to the exhibition and as a guide to navigate themes within Kim Chong Hak's work with your students.

About the Artist and Exhibition

Kim Chong Hak is a prolific Korean landscape painter, with his main subject being Seoraksan National Park in South Korea. He was born in 1937 in Pyongang-budko, Sinuiju, in what is now North Korea. Running concurrently with Kim's life, and informing his artistry, Korea experienced massive societal changes. These include the Japanese colonization of Korea, the splitting of North and South Korea, the Korean war, and the democratic movements following the war. Through that turbulence, Kim created art that attempted to express and define the modern Korean identity. He combines older traditions of Asian landscape art with an interest in American styles such as figurative and expressionist art. Kim uses those techniques to portray nature and the seasonal changes of Mount Seorak and its surrounding environment. *Kim Chong Hak: Painter of Seoraksan* spans the arc of Kim's mature career and presents an aspect of Korean art in the late twentieth century little known outside of South Korea.

Themes

The following themes are explored in this exhibition.

Nature

The theme of nature is incredibly evident in Kim's work. Kim paints landscapes and elements of nature with Mount Seorak and the surrounding Seoraksan National Park as his subjects. He paints nature as a dynamic entity in constant flux. This is embodied in his choice to paint the seasons. As the artist has said, "I spend all four seasons with the mountain, drawing spring in spring, summer in summer, autumn in autumn and winter in winter." Being fully engrossed in the seasons gives Kim's work immediacy and authenticity. Nature as a subject also serves to express emotions such as the joy and renewal of spring and the death and decay of fall.

Themes (cont.)

Return to Self

Originally, Kim rejected the traditional values of Korean painting as well as the techniques and trends of his peers. He left Korea for New York, where he studied American art styles of the late 1970s, including expressionism and abstractionism. However, he continued to paint traditional subjects, such as the Korean landscape. The initial rejection of traditionalism allowed him to make the authentic and autonomous choice to return to it.

Kim took inspiration from the landscape style of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910). During this period, landscape art was considered the highest and most important form of art. Kim made this style distinctively his own by combining the techniques he had learned abroad with traditional motifs and methods.

Kim's embrace of traditionalism did not stop at his work; throughout his life, he has collected traditional art and craft objects, including wooden marriage geese. These items were traditionally given to couples before marriage and kept throughout the relationship. They are hand carved and often passed down from generation to generation. These geese can be seen throughout the exhibition as well as in other collections internationally. To learn more about the historical background and importance of marriage geese, please visit this page from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/853925).

How One Defines or Reclaims Culture

Throughout his work, Kim has attempted to define or reclaim an authentic Korean identity. Having lived through a time of national turbulence he explores a deeply personal identity through the use of symbolism in his nature paintings. By synthesizing international and contemporary expressionist techniques with traditional styles, and using Mount Seorak as his subject, Kim expresses and defines his own identity and Korean identity more broadly.

Vocabulary

- Abstraction: An art style that focuses primarily on the elements of art and principles of design instead of a realistic depiction.
- Asian landscape art: The traditional art style of East Asian countries including realistic Korean landscape painting and figurative Chinese landscape painting.
- Dansaekhwa or monochromatic art: An art style invented in the 1930s and popularized in the 1970s in Korea based around nonfigurative entities and muted colors.
- Expressionism: An art style that usually prioritizes an expression or demonstration of feelings over a realistic narrative.
- Joseon Dynasty: The five hundred years from 1392 to 1910 considered the "golden age" of Korea.
- Mount Seorak: The tallest mountain in the Taebaek Mountain range in the Gangwon Province in eastern South Korea.

Vocabulary (cont.)

- Seoraksan: The national park home to Mount Seorak, located in eastern South Korea. Kim made this his home for many years.
- Traditionalism: An art style that follows a culture or country's established art form that has been passed down for many generations. In Korea, this refers to paintings, pottery, or sculptures that nod to the natural world.

Pre-Visit

- Ground *Kim Chong Hak: Painter of Seoraksan* in students' understanding of visual art history. In Western art history canon, two traditional subjects are portraiture and landscape painting. Show students an example of traditional American landscape art such as Régis François Gignoux's *Niagara Falls* (https://high.org/collection/niagara-falls/). Compare and contrast with a contemporary work of art that incorporates aspects of landscapes such as Julie Mehretu's *Mogamma (A Painting in Four Parts): Part 2* (https://high.org/collection/mogamma-a-painting-in-four-parts-part-2/). What is similar about these two works of art? What is different? Provide context about each work of art in terms of artist's intent.
- Have a similar discussion around a traditional American portrait such as John Singleton Copley's *Portrait of Elizabeth Deering Wentworth Gould Rogers (Mrs. Nathaniel Rogers)* (https://high.org/collection/portrait-of-elizabeth-deering-wentworth-gould-rogers-mrs-nathaniel-rogers/). Compare this portrait to Papay Solomon's *Heavy (Weight), Portrait of Benjamin Gasinga Gaspard—Rwanda* (https://high.org/collection/heavy-weight-portrait-of-benjamin-gasinga-gaspard-rwanda/). What is similar and what is different? What are the artists trying to tell us about each person?
- Visual culture in the United States has a very vast definition, and art history is a part of it. What else defines American visual art culture? Many artists nod to the past within their work while embracing a new way of expressing ideas through portraits and landscapes. In many ways, Kim Chong Hak does the same. He explores Korean visual art culture by honoring traditional subjects such as landscapes and making them his own using specific color palettes and expressive lines, shapes, and colors.
- Share various examples of traditional and contemporary Korean art with students, such as *A Pair of Carp* by an artist once known during the Joseon Dynasty (https://www.artic.edu/artworks/185001/a-pair-of-carp) or *Snow Ume* by Jiha Moon (https://high.org/collection/snow-ume/). Moon traditionally combines her Korean heritage and iconography with American identities and symbols. How are these two works similar to and different from the examples by Mehretu or Solomon?
- How do you think artists incorporate the natural world around them into their artwork, specifically in these examples? How does nature evoke emotions in visual art?

During Visit

- Show students works of art from the Kim Chong Hak Key Images Resource. What do you see in these images that point to a distinct season of weather?
- What emotions do you think Kim is trying to show with the different seasons? What emotions do you associate with the different seasons?
- Kim uses many symbols to evoke abstract ideas. Specifically, show students *Moon* and discuss what they believe to be the meaning of the painting. If this painting shows us a specific time in Kim's life, what mood do you think he is trying to convey? What do you see that makes you say that?

Post-Visit

- After your visit to the High, discuss with students the larger themes around the exhibition. Why do you think Kim Chong Hak chose to depict nature rather than another artistic style such as portraiture or still life to express aspects of his life?
- What adjectives would you use to describe Kim's work to someone who has not seen it?
- Ask students to connect Kim's work to their own lives. How might his approach to art inspire how we think about resilience, identity, and resistance?
- How did students' opinions about landscape paintings change after viewing *Kim Chong Hak: Painter of Seoraksan*? How does his work challenge or confirm our assumptions about landscape art?
- How does Kim Chong Hak's focus on the Korean landscape serve as both a personal refuge and a political statement?

Georgia Standards of Excellence

Grade 1

VA1.CN.1 Investigate and discover the personal relationships of artists to community, culture, and the world through making and studying art.

VA1.CN.1.b Explore the influence of artists and their work in a variety of cultures.

VA1.RE.1 Discuss personal works of art and the artwork of others to enhance visual literacy.

VA1.RE.1.b Explain how selected elements of art are used in works of art to convey meaning.

Grade 2

VA2.RE.1 Discuss personal works of art and the artwork of others to enhance visual literacy.

VA2.RE.1.b Demonstrate an appreciation for art and art making processes by communicating thoughts and feelings.

VA2.RE.1.d Use a variety of strategies to discuss and reflect on personal works of art and the work of peers.

Georgia Standards of Excellence (cont.)

Grade 3

VA3.RE.1 Use a variety of approaches for art criticism and to critique personal works of art and the artwork of others to enhance visual literacy.

VA3.CN.1 Investigate and discover the personal relationships of artists to community, culture, and the world through making and studying art.

VA3.CN.1.b Compare ideas and universal themes from diverse cultures of the past and present.

VA3.CN.3 Develop life skills through the study and production of art (e.g. collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication).

Grade 4

VA4.RE.1 Use a variety of approaches for art criticism and to critique personal works of art and the artwork of others to enhance visual literacy.

VA4.RE.1.a Interpret and evaluate works of art through thoughtful discussion and speculation about the mood, theme, and intentions of those who created a work of art.

VA4.RE.1.c Explain how selected elements and principles of design are used in works of art to convey meaning.

VA4.CN.1 Investigate and discover the personal relationships of artists to community, culture, and the world through making and studying art.

VA4.CN.1.c Discuss how social, political, and/or cultural events inspire art.

Grade 5

VA5.RE.1 Use a variety of approaches for art criticism and to critique personal works of art and the artwork of others to enhance visual literacy.

VA5.RE.1.b Explain how selected elements and principles of design are used in works of art to convey meaning.

VA5.RE.1.a Interpret and evaluate works of art through thoughtful discussion and speculation about the mood, theme, and intentions of those who create works of art.

VA5.CN.1 Investigate and discover the personal relationships of artists to community, culture, and the world through making and studying art.

VA5.CN.1.c Discuss how social, political, and/or cultural events inspire art.

Grade 6

VA6.RE.1 Reflect on the context of personal works of art in relation to community, culture, and the world.

VA6.RE.1.a Identify how the issues of time, place, and culture are reflected in selected works of art.

Georgia Standards of Excellence (cont.)

Grade 6 (cont.)

VA6.RE.1.b Interpret works or art considering themes, ideas, moods, and/or intentions.

VA6.RE.3 Engage in the process of art criticism to make meaning and increase visual literacy.

VA6.CN.1.b Articulate reasons for making art throughout history, including the mutual influence of history, culture, and art.

Grade 7

VA7.RE.2 Critique personal works of art and the artwork of others, individually and collaboratively, using a variety of approaches.

VA7.RE.3 Engage in the process of art criticism to make meaning and increase visual literacy.

VA7.CN.1.a Identify universal themes in works of art from diverse cultures, both past and present.

VA7.CN.1.b Articulate reasons for making art throughout history, including the mutual influence of history, culture, and art.

Grade 8

VA8.RE.3 Engage in the process of art criticism to make meaning and increase visual literacy.

VA8.CN.1 Develop personal artistic voice through connecting uses of art within a variety of cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts.

VA8.CN.1.a Identify universal themes in works of art from diverse cultures, both past and present.

VA8.CN.1.b Articulate reasons for making art throughout history, including the mutual influence of history, culture, and art.

Grades 9–12

VAHSVA.CN.1 Develop personal artistic voice through connecting uses of art within a variety of cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts.

VAHSVA.CN.2 Develop life skills through the study and production of art (e.g. collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication).

VAHSPA.RE.3 Engage in the process of art criticism to make meaning and increase visual literacy.

VAHSPA.CN.2 Develop life skills through the study and production of art (e.g. collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication).

VAHSPA.CN.3 Utilize a variety of resources to understand how artistic learning extends beyond the walls of the classroom.

Georgia Standards of Excellence (cont.)

Grades 9–12 (cont.)

VAHSPA.CN.3.a Access resources to research art (e.g. museums, internet, visiting artists, galleries, community arts organizations, visual culture).

VAHSVA.RE.1 Reflect on the context of personal works of art in relation to community, culture, and the world.

VAHSVA.CR.1 Visualize and generate ideas for creating works of art.

VAHSPA.RE.3 Engage in the process of art criticism to make meaning and increase visual literacy.

VAHSPA.RE.2 Critique personal works of art and the artwork of others, individually and collaboratively, using a variety of approaches.

VAHSPA.RE.1 Reflect on the context of personal works of art in relation to community, culture, and the world.

VAHSPA.RE.1.b Investigate and discuss how the issues of time, place, and/or culture are reflected in works of art.