INTRODUCTION

This resource is for teachers interested in exploring the Pacita Abad exhibition at the Walker Art Center with their students. The guide includes information about the artist and her work, discussion questions, post-tour activities, and a list of resources for further research.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Pacita Abad (US, b. Philippines, 1946–2004) was best known for her “trapunto” paintings and vibrant mixed-media artworks. Her exuberant works span a range of subjects, from globally inspired masks and intimate portrayals of immigrant life to dazzling abstractions and underwater scenes. Many of her works were inspired by stories from the communities she met while traveling abroad and her own experiences as an immigrant.

The term “trapunto,” a form of quilted painting, comes from the Italian word trapungere, meaning “to embroider.” After painting her canvases, Abad would hand-stitch, stuff, and embellish them, creating three-dimensional, tactile surfaces as opposed to stretching the material over a wooden frame.

Born in 1946 in Batanes, the northernmost island province of the Philippines, Abad grew up in the capital city of Manila within a politically involved family. She moved to the United States in 1970 to escape political persecution from the Marcos regime in the Philippines, and became a US citizen in 1994. The artist and her husband, economist Jack Garrity, shared a life of travel for three decades, living and working in more than 60 countries across six continents, including Bangladesh, Mexico, Sudan, Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia.

Largely self-taught, Abad incorporated materials and methods of art-making from her travels—from Korean ink brush painting to Indonesian batik—into her expansive artistic practice. In each of the places where she lived and worked, Abad immersed herself in communities of artists and other makers. Together, they exchanged materials and techniques as well as cultural practices. She had a particular interest in global textile traditions, and was especially drawn to masking traditions used in religious, ceremonial, and artistic contexts. Her radical embrace of art forms like quilting and other kinds of needlework historically marginalized as craft—and often associated with women's and non-Western labor—dissolved distinctions between fine, functional, and decorative arts.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Organized by the Walker Art Center in collaboration with the artist’s estate, Pacita Abad is the first retrospective spanning the artist’s 32-year career. The exhibition includes more than 100 artworks—most of which have never been on public view in the United States—showcasing her experiments in different mediums, including painting, textiles, ceramics, and works on paper. The exhibition celebrates Abad's boldly feminist and transnational outlook, commitment to social justice, and belief in the transformational power of creativity.

What is a retrospective?
A retrospective is an exhibition or compilation of a singular artist’s work highlighting their artistic development over the course of their career, typically shown in a museum or gallery.
“Mask-making is something intercultural—a natural art form. Masks tell you about yourself—where you come from, and who you are. I think children and adults alike are fascinated by that.”  
—Pacita Abad

The exhibition begins with Abad’s Masks and Spirits series from the 1980s and 1990s, which she started after an extended trip to Africa. These large-scale trapunto paintings, many of which stand more than 8 feet tall, are some of her most famous works. These marked a significant departure from her earlier figurative work, which was focused on social and political issues (on view in Gallery 2).

Abad was highly influenced by traditional African and Oceanic masks and art like many modern artists before her, including Picasso and Gauguin. These famous white male artists often appropriated the shapes and designs of so-called “primitive” art (as it was described in the early 19th century). As a woman of color, however, Abad felt she was coming from a place of appreciation for these artists and their skills.

During Abad’s lifetime, most museums in the United States and Europe categorized tribal masks and sculptures as ethnographic or decorative craft, and organized them into generalized categories such as “African” or “Native American.” These broad designations erased the specific cultures and contexts in which they were produced. Abad noted a systemic problem in that these art forms were considered “low art,” while works made by Western male artists inspired by these objects were considered “high art.” She saw herself and her art as a bridge translating between non-Western and Western cultures.

What is the difference between appreciation and appropriation? Appreciation is when someone tries to understand and learn about another culture in an effort to broaden their perspective and connect with others cross-culturally. Appropriation is taking one aspect of a culture that is not their own and using it for their own personal interest.

Subali, 1993/1990, acrylic oil, gold cotton, batik cloth, sequins, rickrack ribbons on stitched and padded canvas; courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate; photo: Rik Sferra for Walker Art Center
ART IN FOCUS: MASKS FROM SIX CONTINENTS SERIES

Over the course of her career, Abad created more than 50 trapunto paintings as part of her series Masks and Spirits. An example is Masks from Six Continents, which features six trapuntos that, for the artist, each represent one of the world’s six habitable continents (not including Antarctica). In Gallery 1, these works have been reunited for the first time since their original installation some 30 years ago.


In 1990, while she was living in Washington, DC, Abad won the Regional Metro Art Award and received a public commission. At that time, these six paintings were installed across a 50-foot mural space in the Metro Center subway station. For Abad, the works reflected the rapidly growing diversity she saw in the capital city and throughout the United States—a theme she revisited in her Immigrant Experience series, on view in Gallery 2.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

• What do you notice about the colors, textures, and shapes in these mask paintings? What do you think the artist was trying to tell us about each culture and/or continent with these colors and patterns?
• Did you notice any interesting objects sewn onto these trapuntos, such as buttons, mirrors, sequins, ribbons, and shells? Have you ever seen an artist use these materials in a painting before? Why might an artist want to use these types of items?
• How can we tell when something is being artistically appropriated versus appreciated?
• Debate: do you think Pacita Abad was appropriating or appreciating other cultures when she made these artworks?
“I truly believe that, as an artist, I have a social responsibility for my painting, to try to make our world a little better.”
—Pacita Abad

Social justice and politicized art were prominent themes in Abad’s life and work over time. Both of her parents were politicians, and she earned a Bachelor’s degree in political science from the University of the Philippines, Diliman. Later studying history and law in the United States, she had planned to become an immigration and human rights lawyer before pivoting to the arts. Inspired by her own experiences as an immigrant, and by the poignant stories of other immigrants and refugees she met during her travels, Abad hoped that her art might give people a better understanding of the complex global immigration experiences that many people of color face.

In this gallery, three of the artist’s large-scale trapuntos are installed from the ceiling near the center of the space. This allows viewers to see both the front and back of each of these elaborately textured and patterned works.

As you explore, look closely at the hand-stitching and sewing techniques on the verso, or back, of Abad’s paintings. Imagine what the hidden sides of other artworks on view in this exhibition might reveal!

5
Flight to Freedom, 1980, acrylic, oil on canvas; collection National Gallery Singapore; courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and National Gallery Singapore

6
If My Friends Could See Me Now, 1991, acrylic, painted canvas, gold yarn on stitched and padded canvas; collection SFMOMA, purchase, by exchange, through gift of Peggy Guggenheim; courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Tina Kim Gallery; photo: Charles Roussel
Fittingly, Abad began researching for her Immigrant Experience series by visiting Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty in New York City in the 1990s. While she enjoyed the museum and its displays, she noticed that these sites were primarily focused on European immigrants, rather than offering a more broad representation of people from across the globe who have moved to the United States. Through her art, she aimed to speak to a different history of migration.


With the “L.A.” of the work’s title alluding to both “Latin American” and “Los Angeles,” the painting proudly stands as a monument for those whose images and stories have been left out of official narratives.

For Abad, it was important to represent a woman with brown skin in this work. In fact, the model for the painting was a friend of the artist’s, who was of Filipina and Chinese descent. Abad continued to include images of friends and acquaintances as models throughout her Immigrant Experience series.

**DISCUSSION PROMPTS**

- How does this artwork make you feel?
- Have you ever seen the back of an artwork before? How is this different from other artworks you’ve seen?
- Abad purposely blocked out the torch’s flame in L.A. Liberty. What kind of statement do you think the artist was trying to make?
- Abad once said, “I am a painter who paints from the gut, but has a strong social conscience.” If you were going to create a series of artworks about a social issue that’s important to you, what would it be?

**OPTIONAL WRITING ACTIVITY FOR GRADES 3–12**

The Statue of Liberty in New York has a poem on its pedestal titled “The New Colossus,” written in 1883 by Emma Lazarus. You may recognize this famous line: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses.” Try writing your own poem for L.A. Liberty. What do you think she would say to immigrants arriving in the United States today?
“I feel like I am an ambassador of colors, always projecting a positive mood that helps make the world smile.” —Pacita Abad

Gallery 3 focuses on Abad’s abstract works from the mid-1980s to the first years of the 2000s. The pieces on view here draw on a wide range of textile traditions, including Panamanian mola, Pakistani ralli quilts, and Bangladeshi kantha. Many combine materials and objects that Abad lovingly collected and altered during her lifetime.

Offering a more immersive view of her life, this gallery also includes a small room re-creating a domestic space with examples of embellished clothing, furniture, and items of comfort that filled her home.

In the small room between Galleries 3 and D/Perlman, be sure to stop and check out her abstractions and self-portraits made from paper pulp.
ART IN FOCUS: 100 YEARS OF FREEDOM: BATANES TO JOLO
This monumental artwork is composed of pieces of fabric Abad collected while traveling through the Philippines in the 1970s. Using these carefully selected materials, she created a comprehensive and striking narrative of the regions and experiences of the people that make up the Philippines, including textile fragments from every province. The work was first exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Manila during the country’s centennial celebration.

Here, Abad chose to tell the story of the Philippines’ struggle for independence through bits of floral and checkered cloth. At the time it was shown, the artist’s choice of these materials may have seemed apolitical, especially in comparison to her Social Realist and Immigrant Experience series. However, in an accompanying text, she detailed the origins of specific fabric scraps, including: “Igorot hand-woven cloth from Baguio and Bontoc; hand-woven ikat weavings from the villages in Kalinga-Apayao; tinalak, tabao scarfs and malongs from Mindanao; Chinese floral silks from Binondo; my grandmother’s Spanish lace mantilla from Cebu; crocheted curtains and dresses made by my mother; panuelos worn by my aunts; and the old justi barongs of my father.”

DISCUSSION PROMPTS
• Select one word to describe the artwork 100 Years of Freedom. Why did you choose that word?
• What do you think the artist was trying to tell us about her home country through her selection of textiles?
• Think of something you collect or have collected in the past. What kind of artwork might you make out of these objects? What story would it tell?

10
100 Years of Freedom: Batanes to Jolo, 1998, oil, acrylic, Philippine cloth (abaca, pineapple, jusi, and banana fibers; Baguio ikat; Batanes cotton crochet; illocano cotton; Chinese silk and beads; Spanish silk, ilongo cloth; Mindanao beads; Zamboanga and Yakan handwoven cloth and sequins) on stitched and dyed cotton fabric; courtesy Pacita Abad Art Estate and Tina Kim Gallery; photo: Charles Roussel
“The objects you see underwater are beautiful. There are so many types of coral in fluorescent colors, so many fish in all shapes and sizes, everything is magical below the surface. ... It is such a peaceful environment down there that one feels like an infidel intruding into somewhere sacred. Every time I dive, I feel like saying, ‘Excuse me, but here I come again!’”
—Pacita Abad

The last gallery features works from Abad’s Underwater Wilderness series. As a child growing up on an island, Abad was afraid of the ocean and didn’t learn how to swim. As an adult, she not only learned how to swim but also became an expert scuba diver.

From 1985 to 1990, Abad created more than 30 underwater works as part of this series. These lush trapunto paintings were inspired by the many scuba trips and dives the artist took throughout the Philippines. At the opening for her exhibition Assaulting the Deep Sea, Abad dressed up in her scuba gear to welcome visitors in the gallery! You can see her outfit in the photo on this page.

Most of the paintings in this series were named after dive locations Abad frequented, such as Anilao, Apo Reef, Puerto Galera, and Sepoc Wall. At first, she wasn’t sure about how to best depict the beauty of these underwater worlds and their immensity, color, and biological diversity. She had described that she wanted her paintings to be as large as possible to give non-divers a sense of what it was like to jump into and explore the deep ocean environment.

In this gallery, instead of focusing on a singular artwork, gather students together in the center of the room and experience the gallery as a whole before “diving” into a discussion.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS
• Have you ever been underwater? If so, what did it feel like? Did you see anything interesting?
• How does the wall color and lighting in this gallery affect your experience moving through it? Did any of the other wall colors in this exhibition affect you, or enhance/detract from your experience?
• Which gallery space, or series, did you connect with the most today? Why?
POST-VISIT ACTIVITY
ABSTRACT ASSEMBLAGES (For Younger Students)

You will need: sturdy paper, glue, fabric scraps and/or paint, small decorative materials (beads, sequins, buttons, shells, etc.), scissors, and/or paintbrushes.

STEP 1
Using Pacita Abad’s abstract textile collages as inspiration, have students create an abstract collage. Hand out a piece of sturdy paper (cardstock or thicker) to each student, then depending on your classroom setup or available supplies, have students:

• Option A: Glue fabric scraps down to the paper in a pattern or placement of their choice. Students will need scissors if they want to cut down fabric scraps into particular shapes.
• Option B: Use paint to create a vibrant backdrop of colors and textures. Students will need paintbrushes and water for this option.
• Option C: Create a multimedia collage with paint and fabric scraps, combining both of the options above.

STEP 2
Once the glue or paint is dry, have students use the small decorative objects (beads, shells, or whatever materials you have handy) to create an abstract pattern on top of their base. If students would prefer to create something more representational, suggest creating an image inspired by what they saw in the galleries (masks, sea life, etc.). Please allow the glue to dry fully before displaying.
POST-VISIT ACTIVITY
ABSTRACT ASSEMBLAGES (For Older Students)

Expanding upon the directions from the previous page, this version of the project is for more dexterous students or for those interested in a more complex 3D design.

You will need: 8 x 10 in. (or larger) pieces of canvas, fabric scraps and/or paint, sewing needles, colored thread, stuffing, small decorative materials (beads, sequins, buttons, shells, etc.), scissors, and/or paintbrushes.

STEP 1
Using Pacita Abad’s abstract textile collages as inspiration, have students create an abstract collage. Hand out one piece of canvas, a needle, and thread to each student, then depending on your classroom setup or available supplies, have students:
• Option A: Stitch fabric scraps onto the canvas in a pattern and placement of their choice. Students will need to know sewing basics such as knot tying and how to thread the needle eye.
• Option B: Paint fabric scraps or canvas pieces in a color of their choice. Once they are dry, they can be sewn onto the larger piece of canvas. Teachers may also prepaint scraps, so they are dry at the time of the activity.

STEP 2
Have students create at least one three-dimensional area by adding stuffing between their canvas and a fabric scrap, echoing Abad’s trapunto works.

STEP 3
Sew the small decorative objects (beads, shells, or whatever materials you have handy) on top of the base canvas and 3D areas to create an abstract pattern or design. If students would prefer to create something more representational, suggest creating an image inspired by what they saw in the galleries (masks, sea life, etc.).

STEP 4 (OPTIONAL)
Try hanging the works from a dowel and/or long string so that everyone can see the front and the stitching on the back of their artwork!

ALTERNATE PROJECT/OPTIONAL RESEARCH COMPONENT
Connecting back to Abad’s lifelong commitment to addressing contemporary social issues in her work, invite students to conduct a small research project on how climate change affects marine life and create an artwork inspired by what they learn.
Pacita Abad Artist Website
pacitaabad.com

Pacita’s Global Travels Map: This interactive map highlights specific places in 62 countries around the world where the artist traveled during her lifetime. google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1JHWkIhYe2XOtlEcnvPMPoFM2TZz0AYz&ll=17.45578402160447%2C-2.41660490000001&z=2


Jack Garrity, “Pacita Abad Masks and Spirits” issuu.com/pacitaabad/docs/masks__spirits_by_jk_garrity

“Immigrant Experience” issuu.com/pacitaabad/docs/immigrant_experience_by_jk_garrity

“Textile Collages” issuu.com/pacitaabad/docs/painted_textile_collages_by_jkgarri

“Swimming with Sharks, Underwater Paintings by Pacita Abad” issuu.com/pacitaabad/docs/painted_textile_collages_by_jkgarri

“Abstract Assemblages, Buttons, Mirrors and Tin” issuu.com/pacitaabad/docs/abstract_assemblages_by_jkgarrity

Yvette Sitten, “Pacita Abad: Spirited Faces,” video youtube.com/watch?v=Pm_2CJPz9PU&t=1s

Tate, “Understanding Pacita Abad’s European Mask” tate.org.uk/art/artworks/abad-european-mask-t15297/understanding-pacita-abads-european-mask

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE
A fully illustrated catalogue, produced by the Walker Art Center in collaboration with the Pacita Abad Art Estate, accompanies the exhibition. Available in the Walker Shop or online at shop.walkerart.org.
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