

# Teacher Resource Guide

## *Origins: Collecting to Create the Nelson-Atkins*

August 14, 2021—March 6, 2022



Lucas Cranach the Younger, German (1515–1586), *Portrait of a Man*, Oil on wood panel (beech), 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 14 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 31-112 | *Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, ca. December 1933. Black and white negative, 10 x 12 cm | *Lion*, Chinese, Qing Dynasty (1644–1911 C.E.). Porcelain, 16 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches. Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 34-18/2

### EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

This guide accompanies the special exhibition *Origins: Collecting to Create the Nelson-Atkins*, on view August 14, 2021 through March 6, 2022. Through works of art and archival materials, *Origins* examines the formation of the Nelson-Atkins' art collection and the stories and people behind it.

The leaders who shaped the Nelson-Atkins in its early years were challenged with the task of establishing an art collection and overseeing construction of a museum building while navigating the Great Depression and respecting the bequests of the museum's two benefactors, William Rockhill Nelson and Mary McAfee Atkins. *Origins* brings to light the decisions that went into establishing the Nelson-Atkins and prompts us to consider the choices we ourselves might make in building a museum collection.

### USING THIS GUIDE

Contents of this guide include discussion questions, activities, and contextual materials to help students engage with the themes and concepts explored in *Origins*. The activities described within lead students through the process of starting a museum, from building a collection to putting objects on display. Along the way, scenarios from the Nelson-Atkins' own history, as featured in *Origins*, provide examples for students to consider.

While the guide can be used to support an in-person visit to the exhibition, it will also be effective when used in the classroom or in a remote learning environment. The content of the guide is adaptable to different grade levels ranging from upper elementary through high school.

Teachers interested in bringing students to view *Origins* at the museum can find the latest information on scheduling and capacity guidelines at [nelson-atkins.org/museum-tours](https://nelson-atkins.org/museum-tours). Please note that the Covid-19 situation continues to evolve, and in-person visits may be unavailable. The virtual tour *Museum Unframed: Behind the Scenes at the Nelson-Atkins* offers a similarly-themed alternative to onsite visits.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The activities described in this guide are designed to meet the following objectives:

- Students will learn about the people and decisions that went into establishing the Nelson-Atkins and its collection.
- Students will reflect on what it means to create a museum and will think critically about the decisions they would make in starting their own museum.

## STARTING YOUR MUSEUM

### The Mission

One of the key decisions involved in starting a museum is to identify its mission. This early step requires answering key questions like:

- Why should this museum exist?
- What purpose will it serve?
- Who should benefit from it?

Early leaders of the Nelson-Atkins answered these questions in speeches and publications around the time of the museum's opening, and they even embedded their ideals in the structure of the building itself. Take a look at the quotations below, which were carved into the museum's exterior walls in 1933.

*Through art we realize our perfection.* (Oscar Wilde)

*Art still has truth, take refuge there.* (Matthew Arnold)

*The soul has greater need of the ideal than of the real.* (Victor Hugo)

*True painting is only the image of the perfection of God.* (Michelangelo)

What do those statements tell us about the purpose that the museum's early leaders wanted it to serve?

Compare the ideas expressed above with the museum's current mission statement:



*The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art invites all people to explore the art in its care, and through its broad collection, the depths and complexities of human experiences. [...] With art as our focus, the Nelson-Atkins strives to create a sense of belonging for all people.*

Next, have students write their own mission statement for the museum they wish to establish. What ideals would they want it to embody?

### The Collection

Usually, part of forming a museum mission statement involves determining what kinds of objects will make up the museum's collection. Some museums collect art, while others focus on historical artifacts, natural specimens, or other collectibles.

When William Rockhill Nelson was alive, he bought copies of famous "Old Master" art—works by European artists who were highly regarded among art historians. These were displayed in The Western Gallery of Art in Kansas City. After his death, the early leaders of the Nelson-Atkins had to decide whether to follow in Nelson's footsteps by buying reproductions or to collect something different. They opted to collect original works by artists from a variety of times and places.

Students can see examples of both Nelson's purchases and the works that were collected after his death by visiting the *Origins* exhibition or by viewing the online gallery here: [art.nelson-atkins.org/mycollections/6248/origins-collecting-to-create-the-nelsonatkins](https://art.nelson-atkins.org/mycollections/6248/origins-collecting-to-create-the-nelsonatkins).



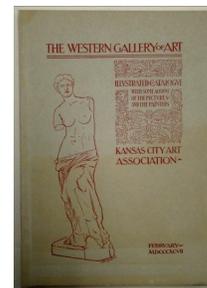
*Piece of Brick,*  
Mesopotamian (Telloh,  
Iraq), about 2200 B.C.E.  
Clay, 12 1/2 x 12 1/2 x 3  
inches. William Rockhill  
Nelson Trust, 30-1/1.

The accession number (30-1/1) assigned to this clay brick indicates that it was the first object acquired into the Nelson-Atkins' collection.

After viewing these early collection objects, read Nelson’s justification for collecting only reproductions:

*The purpose which led to the establishment of The Western Gallery of Art found its impulse in the belief that a comprehension of the grandeur of the Old Masters and an appreciation of the surpassing excellence of their work, is the essential foundation of a discriminating love for art. [...] The aim of The Western Gallery of Art is to set forth an adequate impression of the character and power of those masterpieces; and with that end in view, it has secured as its first equipment, faithful copies of twenty great pictures...*

(Note: Click [here](#) to view a scan of the source document for this excerpt.)



Cover of the catalog for The Western Gallery of Art, 1897

Discuss as a class:

- Do you think there is value in collecting reproductions for a museum? Why or why not?
- Why do you think the early leaders of the Nelson-Atkins decided to collect original works of art instead of copies?
- What kinds of objects will make up the collection of the museum you are envisioning? Who will be involved in deciding which objects to collect?

## BRINGING THINGS TOGETHER

### Acquisitions

Objects can be brought into the museum’s collection through purchases or gifts. When a curator or other museum leader wishes to add an object to the collection, they typically need to justify the new acquisition.



Lucas Cranach the Younger, German (1515—1586). *Portrait of a Man*, 1538. Oil on beech panel, 19 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 14 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> inches. William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 31-112.

While not the same work described in the letter, this Cranach painting was purchased for the museum’s collection on the advice of Parsons.

Have students read over this excerpt from a letter that art advisor Harold Woodbury Parsons wrote when trying to convince the museum’s early leaders to purchase a painting by the 16<sup>th</sup>-century artist Lucas Cranach the Younger. What reasoning does Parsons give for why the museum should acquire this work?

*I know the work of Cranach very well indeed, having bought an important work by that master and having studied him thoroughly. The *Portrait of a Man with a square beard at Steinmeyer’s* is as fine an example of the master as we could find. Sachs who knows this school well, recommended this particular picture to me when I asked if he had seen any works by Cranach. One has to know the engravings and woodcuts of this German master to understand the significance of this painting and the (correctness?) of the attribution. Steinmeyer tells me that he will accept \$20,000 for the picture from a museum, his asking price being \$25,000.*

(Note: Click [here](#) to view a scan of the source document for this excerpt.)

Next, review the questions below, which are now standard parts of an acquisition proposal at the Nelson-Atkins. How do they compare with the documentation Parsons provided?

- Artist’s name and date of birth/death?
- Artist’s gender and nationality?
- Object title?
- Medium (what is the object made of)?

- Dimensions (length, width, and height of the object)?
- Does the object contain a signature, label, or any other identifying marks?
- What is the object’s provenance (the chain of ownership from when it was created until now)?
- How much is it worth?
- What is the current condition of the object? Does it need to be treated by conservators to address damage?
- Why is this object right for the museum’s collection?

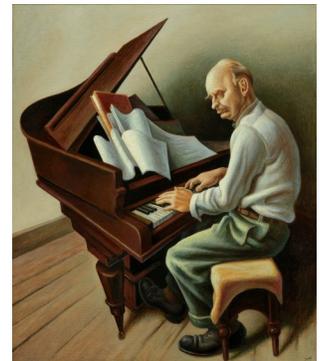
Invite students to identify one object that they would like to include in their museum’s collection, and then have them complete their own acquisition proposal for that object using the questions above.

### Working with Donors

William Rockhill Nelson’s bequest provided funds for the museum’s art collection, but it prohibited the purchase of works by living artists or artists who had been deceased less than 30 years. (Note: Click [here](#) to view a scan of William Rockhill Nelson’s will, with this requirement highlighted.) The museum’s early leaders felt it was important to find a way to bring newer works into the collection.

Prompt students to brainstorm solutions to this problem—how could they expand the collection while following the restrictions of the bequest?

Next, view Thomas Hart Benton’s painting *The Sun Treader (Portrait of Carl Ruggles)*. This was the first work purchased for the Nelson-Atkins by the Friends of Art, a group of community art supporters who pooled their money to buy art that fell outside the stipulations of Nelson’s bequest. Discuss: What might be the pros and cons of this solution to the collection dilemma?



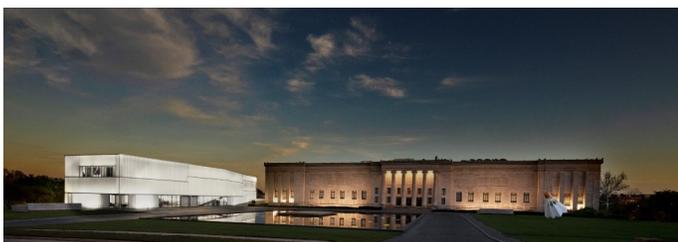
Thomas Hart Benton, American (1889—1975). *The Sun Treader (Portrait of Carl Ruggles)*, ca. 1935. Tempera with oil on canvas, mounted on panel, 45 x 38 inches. Gift of the Friends of Art, 36-4.

Because many museums rely on the generosity of donors, questions about whether to accept a gift that comes with restrictions are not uncommon. Today’s leaders of the Nelson-Atkins think carefully about the implications of these decisions. Have students imagine the following scenario for their own museum:

*A local philanthropist has offered to give your museum a large cash donation to pay for construction of needed gallery space. The donation agreement requires that the philanthropist be allowed to choose the architect and control the design of the space. Will you accept the gift?*

## PUTTING THE COLLECTION IN PLACE

### The Building



The original Nelson-Atkins building, built in 1933, has been described as “part monument, part temple to art.” Its symmetrical design was inspired by the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome. When an addition needed to be added in the early 2000s, architects were asked to design a building that would complement the original structure.

Invite students to view the [top design submissions for the addition](#), and consider:

- What stands out to you about each design?
- How does each addition fit with the existing building?
- Which design would you have chosen?

Students can then look online or in their own community to find other buildings for inspiration as they design a structure to house their own museum collection.

### The Presentation

Every museum must decide how to organize its collection for display. Objects might be grouped by time period or theme. Or, they might be displayed in a way that produces a visual or atmospheric effect. C.T. Loo, an art dealer who sold art to the Nelson-Atkins in its early years, recommended displaying a set of unrelated Chinese artworks together to recreate the sense of being inside a Chinese Buddhist temple. Students can view a model of this “Temple Gallery” below, and then compare the model with the final gallery space that was created inside the museum.



C.T. Loo



C. T. Loo & Company (Paris and New York, 1914—1948). Model of the Chinese temple gallery, 1931. Wood, plywood, paper, marbled paper, paint, metal fastenings, T2017.45.



Recent view of the Chinese Temple Gallery

Have students view the museum’s other galleries using the [Google Arts & Culture Street View](#) tool. What do they notice about how works of art have been grouped for display?

Using the [Curate Your Own Exhibition card set](#), students can group works of art from the Nelson-Atkins according to themes of their choosing. Or, they can use the theme cards provided in the set to think about how they would organize and display objects in their own museum collection.

## PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

### Reflect and Look Ahead

Like any organization, museums need to be committed to self-reflection and reinvention. They can learn valuable lessons from their successes and failures, and they remain relevant only by adapting to a changing society. One tool that the Nelson-Atkins uses to do this is called a strategic plan. Students can read the museum’s [current strategic plan](#), and then discuss:

- What have you learned through the process of envisioning your own museum?
- How do you think the Nelson-Atkins has changed from the time of its founding to today?
- How could you ensure that your own museum remains committed to its mission while adapting to a changing world?

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

### Books

#### ***The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art: A History***

Kristie C. Wolferman, 2020.  
(available in the ERC)

#### ***High Ideals and Aspirations: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1933-1993***

Michael Churchman and Scott Erbes, 1993.  
(available in the ERC or online at the [Internet Archive](#))

### Web

#### **“Starting a Museum”**

Webpage created by the American Alliance of Museums, 2014.

#### **“Ready for Art: The 1933 Opening of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art”**

Google Arts & Culture exhibition created by The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art Archives, 2020.

#### **“Origins: Exhibition Resources”**

Additional multimedia resources created by The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2021.

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

The activities described in this guide can engage students with the following curriculum standards:

### **Visual Art Anchor Standard #4**

Select, analyze and interpret artistic work for presentation.

### **Visual Art Anchor Standard #6**

Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

## EDUCATOR RESOURCE CENTER

The ERC supports teachers in identifying connections between the museum and classroom learning. We can help expand pre- and post-visit activities to connect students’ museum experience with your classroom curriculum. The ERC offers:



- Curriculum consultations
- Circulating resources
- Professional development workshops

Visit [nelson-atkins.org/educators/resources](https://nelson-atkins.org/educators/resources) for info.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS RELATED TO THE ORIGINS EXHIBITION

<b>Acquisition</b>	An object bought or attained by a museum that is added to its collection
<b>Bequest</b>	The act of giving away assets after death through the provisions of a will
<b>Collection</b>	A group of objects gathered for study, preservation, and/or display
<b>Curator</b>	A person who oversees a collection within a museum or similar institution
<b>Mission statement</b>	A concise statement explaining an organization’s reason for existing
<b>Philanthropist</b>	A person who gives money to causes that promote human welfare
<b>Trustee</b>	A person with the power to oversee an estate and the legal obligation to ensure it is administered according to its specified purpose