

Middle School | Protective Spirits

Michael Rakowitz's colorful, immersive artworks are inspired by the ancient palace of Nimrud, the capital of the Assyrian Empire for over 150 years (879-706 BCE). The ancient palace walls were covered with stone carvings incorporating symbols and myths of Assyrian culture. In the 19th-century, Nimrud was rediscovered by amateur archeologist Austen Henry Layard and became an important site for research and excavation. Pieces of the palace were removed and distributed to museums and colleges around the world (including Hamilton College).

In the exhibition Rakowitz: Nimrud, the artist recreates one room of the palace, representing the missing pieces as black fissures and patches. Instead of stone, colorful packaging from foods imported from the Middle East connect the sculptures to the vibrant Assyrian communities of today. In 2015, the site of Nimrud was destroyed in an act of war carried out by the Islamic State. Today, Rakowitz's work stands as a contemporary monument to Assyrian history, people, and culture.

In this workshop, participants will learn about the symbolism and iconography of ancient Assyrian artwork and delve into Rakowitz's representation of the missing pieces from the palace of Nimrud. They will reflect on the people, pets, and objects that make them feel safe and be invited to create a drawing or collage inspired by the protective spirits of Assyrian myth.



Michael Rakowitz, Panel H-17, Room H, Northwest Palace of Nimrud, from the series *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, 2020.

About the Exhibition *Michael Rakowitz: Nimrud*

For *Michael Rakowitz: Nimrud*, the Iraqi-American artist has recreated Room H from the well-known Northwest Palace in the ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud (Kalhu), located near Mosul in present-day Iraq dating from 883-859 B.C.E. To make his colorful reproductions of the ancient carved-stone reliefs, Rakowitz uses packaging for food products imported from the Middle East to the U.S. and sold in local Middle-Eastern groceries in Chicago, where the artist lives and works. In the mid-nineteenth century, many of the palace's reliefs were removed by archeologists and acquired by private collections and public institutions throughout the Western world, including Hamilton College. While Rakowitz's materials reference the current Middle Eastern diaspora, the content of his work is a reaction to centuries of looting ancient sites—both legally sanctioned and illegal, often occurring in times of foreign occupation. His work implicates the museum as a colonial entity and calls attention to the problematic and pervasive practice of removing cultural artifacts from their original context.



Michael Rakowitz, Panel H-17, Room H, Northwest Palace of Nimrud, from the series *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, 2020.

Docents at the Wellin Museum

As a teaching museum, the Wellin offers experiential learning opportunities to students. All tours and programs are led by docents in collaboration with museum education staff. Docents are Hamilton College students who act as educational guides through our exhibitions and collections. They come from a wide range of backgrounds and offer their own academic knowledge, creating a unique, personalized, and fresh perspective while discussing the artwork on view. Hamilton College's mission highlights "education in all its forms," and this approach is at the core of the Wellin Museum's interdisciplinary approach for all of our visitors.

Ancient and Contemporary Worlds Abbreviated Lesson Plan

Essential Question: What makes us feel safe and protected, and how might we express safety through art?

Outline of Workshop:

- Mindfulness moment
- Close Looking Activity: See, Think, Wonder
- History of the Northwest Palace at Nimrud
- Group discussion of iconography in ancient Assyrian artwork and Rakowitz's representation of the missing pieces from the palace of Nimrud.
- All About the Artist
- Personal Reflection: What people, objects, or pets make you feel protected?
- Introduction of suggested art project



Michael Rakowitz, Panel H-17, Room H, Northwest Palace of Nimrud, from the series *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, 2020.

Suggested Art Project: Protective Spirits

Create a work of art depicting the people, pets, and objects that make you feel safe!

Download the accompanying slideshow as a .ppt or .pdf file.

Materials:

- Paper
- Drawing supplies
- Magazines or other colorful papers (for collage)
- Glue, water, and a paintbrush or sponge (for collage)

Steps:

1. Think about the people, objects, and pets that make you feel protected and safe.
2. Plan your design. Do you want to depict yourself with the protective items and people? Are there ways to combine objects, pets, or people in one figure, such as the eagle-winged *apkallu* figure or the Assyrian King with his sword?
3. Create your drawing or collage. For collage, glue layers of colorful paper and magazine clippings onto your surface and seal them with another layer of glue thinned with water.
4. Choose a space to display your protective spirit where you can see it regularly!



Michael Rakowitz, Panels H-15-H17, Room H, Northwest Palace of Nimrud, from the series *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, 2020.

Related Resources

Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art: [Exhibition Webpage](#)

[Rakowitz Exhibition Video](#)

[Artists in Conversation: Michael Rakowitz](#), Recorded on October 6, 2020

[Michael Rakowitz's Art of Return](#) - Profile of the artist published in the *New Yorker* magazine, August 2020

[Michael Rakowitz's Food Truck Project: Enemy Kitchen](#)

Thinking Routines used in this lesson:

- [See, Think, Wonder](#)

[More thinking routines to check out](#) from Harvard Graduate School of Education's *Project Zero*

[National Gallery of Art Interdisciplinary Teaching Ideas \(by grade\)](#)

Wellin-recommended at-home art activities for families:

[MoMA At Home](#)

[Wellin Museum: Color Our Collection](#)



Michael Rakowitz, Panel H-16, Room H, Northwest Palace of Nimrud, from the series *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*.

See, Think, Wonder

A routine for exploring works of art and other interesting things.

- What do you **see**?
- What do you **think** about that?
- What does it make you **wonder**?

Purpose: *What kind of thinking does this routine encourage?*

This routine encourages students to make careful observations and thoughtful interpretations. It helps stimulate curiosity and sets the stage for inquiry.

Application: *When and where can I use it?*

Use this routine when you want students to think carefully about why something looks the way it does or is the way it is. Use the routine at the beginning of a new unit to motivate student interest or try it with an object that connects to a topic during the unit of study. Consider using the routine with an interesting object near the end of a unit to encourage students to further apply their knowledge and ideas.

Launch: *What are some tips for starting and using this routine?*

Ask students to make an observations about an object—it could be an artwork, image, artifact, or topic—and follow up with what they think might be going on or what they think this observations might be. Encourage students to back up their interpretation with reasons. Ask students to think about what this makes them wonder about the object or topic.

The routine works best when a student responds by using the three stems together at the same time, i.e., “*I see..., I think..., I wonder...*.” However, you may find that students begin using one stem at a time, and that you need to scaffold each response with a follow-up question for the next stem. The routine works well in a group discussion but in some cases you may want to ask students to try the routine individually on paper or in their heads before sharing out as a class. Student responses to the routine can be written down and recorded so that a class chart of observations, interpretations, and wonderings are listed for all to see and return to during the course of study.

Share your experience with this thinking routine on social media using the hashtags [#PZThinkingRoutines](#) and [#SeeThinkWonder](#).



WELLIN

Ruth and Elmer
Wellin Museum of Art
Hamilton College

© Michael Rakowitz. Image courtesy of
Michael Rakowitz Studio, Chicago, IL.
For educational purposes only.