A MATTER OF FACT

TOYIN OJIH ODUTOLA

MOAD
RESOURCE GUIDE
How to Use This Guide When Visiting MoAD

This *A Matter of Fact Resource Guide* is intended for use with students in grades 3 through 12; however, the content may need to be adjusted to meet your specific learning goals. Due to the wide spread of grade levels, many of the activities do not exactly meet the Common Core State Standards for each grade. The Student Vocabulary Sheet and Question Sheets should be used to prepare students for a focused museum visit. The Vocabulary Sheet introduces students to some of the terms they will encounter throughout the exhibition. Additional vocabulary words are found throughout the guide and are italicized and bold.

When visiting MoAD, give each of your students a copy of the Questions to Use While at MoAD to further engage them in the context of the exhibition. Be sure to have your students answer the Reflection Questions as soon as possible after your visit to the Museum. These are designed to help students think deeper about the exhibitions after they have visited MoAD.

You may choose to complete any of the Activities or the Lesson Plan after your visit to the Museum. Note that while this guide strives to help students understand many of the histories which inform the work in the exhibition, we are not able to provide a comprehensive overview in such a limited number of pages.

We sincerely hope that you find this Resource Guide helpful and welcome any comments or feedback you may have for us. We would love to hear how you choose to integrate the material into your classroom or program. If you have developed handouts or found other resources to enhance this guide, please email a copy of your resource to us.

**Demetri Broxton**  
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A Matter of Fact is a series of drawings by artist Toyin Ojih Odutola. The exhibition represents a brand new direction for Ojih Odutola, who was previously focused entirely on drawing the human figure in her unique figurative style. Her previous artworks were often monochrome, employing minimal use of color, and the figures usually floated on the page with no background imagery. This latest series of drawings are full of color and display her subjects in lavish environments—places reserved only for the wealthiest of people. In the series, Toyin tells the story of Black wealth through the fictionalized UmuEze Amara Clan. UmuEze means “royalty” in the Igbo language of Nigeria, West Africa. In the Igbo language, Amara means “grace”.

Of her work, Toyin states:

“The idea of portraying the construct(s) of class and wealth as a subject, with an emphasis on place and space, offered the language I’ve so often reserved solely for the people who inhabit such environs and opportunity to morph and evolve. This was an exercise I had yet to take up directly in my work, but had been evident in the work I was attracted to, by such artists as Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Kerry James Marshall, Paula Rego, John Singer Sargent, Jonas Wood, and Lucien Freud, to name a few. I’ve always wanted to combine and manipulate their aesthetics to create a new form of representational deconstruction while remaining grounded in the orbit of my style.

“2016 has brought to the fore ideas about wealth and worth, more pointedly, about the expressions of certain kinds of wealth. Since my youth, I have been entranced by the presumption and disposition of those who choose to don such identities regarding wealth. They seem so permanent, so staid and true. You knew someone was wealthy because the privilege of wealth was evident in everything they did, not simply everything they owned. This included abstract elements: mannerism, graphology, speech patterns, taste, etc.; however, the most evident of these qualities was the surroundings of the wealthy and how those surroundings were treated. The spaces people of wealth inhabit seem to exist beyond fact: they were established and thusly never considered. These spaces were taken for what they were and never questioned. Being a migrant child of Nigerian descent whose developmental growth was dominated by a sense of precariousness and a fear of the unknown,
the idea of living in such places and existing in such a solid state seemed fantastical: what would it be like to have such foundations to always fall back upon and to know they would always be there?

“As I grew and my attentions turned to art making and the conceptual portrait, I’ve always approached each series with a narrative that hinged on the aforementioned: how identity is so malleable, so suspect, and more of an amalgamation of attributes which an individual wears, either by choice or usurps or is forced to live with by societal demarcations. Like Blackness, wealth defines the spaces of those who inhabit it – it limits and/or permits movement and readjusts context. Furthermore, like anything involving race and ethnicity, wealth, upon the striated plane of class, is indicative of a history that is invented and constantly reaffirmed to keep the construct going.

“With A Matter of Fact I aimed to invent a history of wealth within a family, whose entire existence was defined by wealth, opulence, and privilege. This was a daunting task for this was no ordinary set of characters. These were the Kennedy’s and the Winder’s, combined by way of Nigeria. Imagine all of the trappings of Europeanized wealth and status, all the markers of aristocratic respectability, come into the form around and for the sake of black figures in a space. This was not about science fiction nor reaffirming the actual history of the Black nouveau riche in America and beyond; this was about picturing what wealth does to the viewer’s read when one sees it displayed so nonchalantly—where the wealth and, by extension, the characters defined by such wealth are not questioned.

“The very nature of wealth, the ecology of the space it creates, is the subject. The constructs are layered all over the composition of my drawings. You are aware that what you are seeing is an invention, carefully staged to convince you; however, if you did not know it was all invented would any of that matter? The characters who inhabit these spaces are comfortable in them: they have never known struggle, they have always known this world and have always belonged there. To put yourself in that mindset is to include them in the same propagandized depictions of nobility in London, Versailles, Amsterdam, Venice, and so on. The same construct applies. Their identities are always a projection, even if the works are commissioned from very established personas, the construct is the binding that holds their purpose and without such, the foundations I so envied as a child would fall apart.

“In sum, A Matter of Fact questions how we value the depictions of wealth: how we translate the markings of it into our culture. It is something so desired and fought after in our society, but no one can truly compact it. It readjusts itself and morphs with the times. It encompasses a variety and in turn can be inhabited by a variety of people. The irony is that you often do not see such variety in depictions of wealth in the Western art historical canon. I am not here to ask “Why is that so?”, this is not the case, because that question answers itself. What I did ask myself in the making of this series is:” Why does it matter?” From that standpoint, I allowed for the characters of the UmuEze Amara Clan to emerge with more freedom of wealth expression. The fictionalized Emeka family of UmuEze Amara are multifaceted, they are varied, they are in all aspects of public life, yet own and control their own private realms, and thrive in both. They are a band of characters who have always existed and yet never existed. Each portrayal is an act of marking a territory, creating a land for the subjects—persons and places—to colonize to mold for his/her/their own purpose. The accoutrements and appointments are instantly recognizable, even borrowed but the translation feels fresh and appropriate, applicable to the past and now. If anything, I want whoever comes to experience this exhibition to suspend their judgements and escape into the lives of this great house and ask: Where would these people be today? What would they say if they saw themselves like this? Would they shrug it off or would they wonder, ‘Why haven’t I seen this before?’ Or maybe ask as I did upon completion of this series: ‘Where do they go from here?’”

Toyin Ojih Odutola
New York, 2016
A Matter of Fact is a series of drawings by artist Toyin Ojih Odu-tola. This series of large-scale drawings are full of color and display her subjects in lavish environments—places reserved only for the wealthiest of people. In the series, Toyin tells the story of Black wealth through the fictionalized UmuEze Amara Clan. UmuEze means “royalty” in the Igbo language of Nigeria, West Africa. Also in Igbo, Amara means “grace”.

1. List at least five things you see in the portraits that let you know that you are looking at a very wealthy family.

2. Most of the portraits in the gallery are very large. What are some reasons you think the artist might have chosen to make her artwork this size?

3. Look at the clothing worn by the characters in Toyin’s drawings. How is their clothing similar to the clothing of average people you see outside or in your neighborhood? How is their clothing different than the average person? Describe what you see.
4. Visit the drawing entitled, *A Grand Inheritance*. The drawing has a young man lounging in a red chair with his leg hanging over one of the chair’s arms. Behind him is a painting of a woman hanging on the wall.
   a. How is the woman’s skin different from the man’s skin?

   b. What are some possible reasons why the artist chose to render (draw) the skin differently for the two people in this drawing?

5. In the space below, draw your favorite portrait in the exhibition. You may choose to draw the entire portrait or your favorite part of the portrait.
1. Toyin Ojih Oduoluta makes her figures ultra-Black, and actually uses charcoal to draw their skin. She is interested in the social construct of Blackness, as well as placing a Black cast of characters in a wealthy environment.
   a. What are some reasons why you think she might have chosen to render the skin so dark?

   b. Do you think the work would have the same impact or meaning if the figures had lighter skin? Why or why not?

2. None of the characters in Toyin’s drawings are smiling. What are some possible reasons why they are not smiling? Are people who smile in photographs actually happy? What might a person’s expression in a portrait tell you about how they view themselves? Explain your thinking.
Toyin Ojih Odutola is a contemporary artist who focuses on identity and the concept of skin color through her pen, ink, and charcoal drawings. Toyin was born in Ifé, Nigeria (West Africa) in 1985. Moving from Nigeria to the United States had a huge impact on her view of the world and her artwork. When Toyin was nine years old, her parents moved the family from Nigeria to Alabama in the United States. Alabama is very conservative and has a long history of racism and segregation. When she was in Alabama, for the first time, she realized that she was black and “foreign”, because kids would tell her to her face. “Before that, being black and African was just part of… what made me and I was treated based on my performance. But when I moved to Alabama, I realized my performance no longer mattered because my skin suddenly spoke for me. I realized it would impact how people treated and responded to me and that continued into my adulthood.”

“I’m doing black on black on black, trying to make it as layered as possible in the deepness of the blackness to bring it out. I noticed the pen became this incredible tool. The black ballpoint [pen] ink on blackboard would become copper tone and I was like ‘wow, this isn’t even black at all!’ The black board was like this balancing platform for the ink to become something else. I instantly recognized this notion, of how we think something is a certain way and in reality it is something else…” Ojih Odutola says in an August 2013 interview about the show, My Country Has No Name in the International Review of African American Art.

When asked why the majority of her figures are black in an interview with the Village Voice, Ojih Odutola responds, “Of course they’re black figures because they’re drawn in black pen [and charcoal], but not all of the figures are of African American descent, or at least the reference isn’t. One of the things I like to play with is, “What is black?” Is it because I drew it? Is it because it looks black? Is it because you think the figure is black? Because a lot of it is just a filter, and the filters get more and more obstructed by whatever people think the image is about and not really what it is.”
Toyin Ojih Odutola was born in the West African country of Nigeria. Nigeria is more than twice the size of California. The coastline is covered in sandy beaches and mangrove swamps and lagoons. North of the beaches, is a lowland hilly region with rainforests in the south and savannah lands to the north. The Yoruba people are one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. Because a large number of enslaved Africans were brought from the West Coast of Africa, a large number of Black people in Brazil, Cuba, the United States, and the Caribbean are descendants of the Yoruba people.

The kingdom of Ifé first emerged around AD 800. It was one of several competing West African kingdoms that developed during the medieval period. Ifé’s power & wealth was probably partly derived from its access to the lucrative Niger River trade routes, connecting it to the wider trade networks of West Africa & the Sahara. Today Ifé is regarded as the spiritual heartland of the Yoruba people of southwest Nigeria.

The lines on the king’s face in the Ifé Bronze Head are most likely scarification. Scarification used to be a common custom throughout West Africa, in which permanent lines are etched into a person’s skin using stones, glass, knives, or sharpened metal. The scarification pattern symbolizes the tribe or cultural group a person belongs to, or they can indicate social status, with certain patterns only being reserved for very powerful and important families. During the Transatlantic Slave Trade, scarification helped the enslaved people find other people from their tribe or nearby tribes. Later, when some enslaved people were freed, they returned to Africa and were able to go back to their original city or village because of their facial scarification. Today, due to the influence of globalism and with more Africans moving to cities, fewer people are practicing scarification.
In 1939, bronze heads were discovered in Ifé – the city where Toyin was born. It is important to note that Toyin says that her work is not influenced by the Ifé heads. The bronze heads from Ifé date to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and were made using the lost-wax method. For the lost-wax method, artists first make their sculpture from clay. When the clay is dried, they add a thin layer of beeswax over the entire clay model. Next, they engrave designs and details in the wax. They cover the entire wax layer with a layer of very thick clay to make a mold and then let that clay dry. The entire mold is heated at very high heat in a fire until all of the beeswax pours out of the bottom of the mold. Finally, the artist pours molten (liquid) bronze into the mold. The bronze fills in all the spaces where the wax used to be located and it takes on the exact shape of the wax design. When the bronze cools down, the artist breaks away the clay and the sculpture is complete.

Bronze sculptures were also made in the nearby kingdom of Benin, but anthropologists are able to prove that artists from Ifé taught the Benin artisans how to create bronze metalwork sculptures. The Ifé bronzes are considered to be some of the most beautiful works of art to have ever been made anywhere in the world. They were technologically advanced and although Toyin says that her work is not directly influenced by the Ifé sculptures, we can see a visual connection. Like many cultures of West Africa, the people of Ifé kept altars to honor their ancestors, where they would leave offerings and seek advice from their departed relatives. The people of Ifé believed that their kings and queen mothers had a unique ability to communicate with the ancestors and were able to receive advice about the past and future. The Ifé bronzes are beautiful and very realistic.

The time period known in Europe as the Medieval Age was the Golden Age of West Africa. Trade routes crossed all over West Africa, connecting the kingdom of Ifé to other kingdoms throughout West Africa and as far as North-Eastern Africa and Spain. Ifé grew to become a flourishing, wealthy city. The rulers of Ifé promoted the arts, especially metal casting, weaving, and bead-making.

The most famous Ifé Head, pictured here, has a red crown covered with coral bead designs. The metal and large number of beads represented in the Ifé Bronze heads show off the king’s wealth and connection to a huge trade network. Brass and beads were signs of power and luxury materials that were only reserved for the wealthiest and most powerful people in society.

In Nigeria, it is said that “the head leads one through life’s journey.” As the point on our body where we can see, speak, hear, and think, the head is the most powerful symbol of a great leader and so the Ifé heads represent the king’s power.
For the vocabulary section, there are several ways to teach students the terms. There are 12 terms. Depending on the size of your group, you may want to divide students into groups of three or four students and assign each group a couple of the vocabulary terms. Have students visually represent what the vocabulary term means by creating a drawing which illustrates the vocabulary word. For texture, for example, the students can draw sandpaper or a feather to describe that texture is what something feels to the touch or looks like it feels. Students need to be comfortable with all of the vocabulary terms in order to complete the next group of activities.

**Element of Art** – line, color, shape/form, texture, value, space – the visual components that make up a piece of art.

**Color**
the hue of reflected or projected light.

**Line**
the lines in a piece of art work.

**Shape**
flat or two-dimensional objects in art.

**Form**
an element in art that is three-dimensional.

**Value**
the lightness or darkness of tones or colors.

**Texture**
the way things feel or look like they might feel if they were touched.

**Space**
the sense of depth created in a piece of art.
COMPARE & CONTRAST

Ifé-Era Bronze Oba Head, circa 1000 AD.

Using Visual Art Vocabulary, discuss similarities between the bronze Oba’s head and Toyin’s piece, *Afternoon Tea*, 2016. What are the differences? As a class (on a white board or overhead projector), in small groups, or individually, have students write in the similarities and differences on the following Venn diagram.
In Toyin Ojih Odutola’s exhibition, A Matter of Fact, the artist portrays Black subjects engaged in leisurely activities that are usually only reserved for the wealthy. More often than not, the subjects of paintings of high society are white. Art history texts generally refer to the origins of portraiture from a Western perspective – originating in Greece and Ancient Rome though examples can be found in Ancient Egypt and Ancient Sumeria.

Kehinde Wiley and Yinka Shonibare MBE are contemporary artists, who have roots in Nigeria, like Toyin, and also use their art to challenge concepts of power and race. Kehinde Wiley is most famous for his large, vibrant paintings of young African American men wearing hip hop street fashion. Kehinde bases his paintings on seventeenth through nineteenth-century Western art that has been canonized (regarded as the most important) by museums and art historians. The time period of the art that Wiley references was called the Baroque period, when artists painted in a way that incorporated exaggerated lighting, intense emotions, and very ornate clothing and architecture.

Yinka Shonibare MBE also references works of art that are canonized by museums and art historians. Instead of paintings, Shonibare recreates the famous paintings through sculptures. He recreates Baroque European clothing replacing the fabric with Dutch wax print, which is made in the Netherlands but has become associated with Africa because of its widespread use throughout the continent. Shonibare removes the heads from his figures. As in the Ifé heads, the head is the location of power. It also represents your identity as an individual. The first thing we recognize about a person is their face, so without a head, the people in Shonibare’s pieces do not have a clear identity. The headless people also make a reference to the French Revolution and the beheading of the ruling elite – the most famous being the execution of King Louis XVI’s queen, Marie Antoinette.
For the following images, students will look at the pictures in pairs through a facilitated activity called Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). Through the process of observing and asking open-ended questions, students will be able to create meaning from their observations. Students will support their interpretations with visual evidence from what they observe in the artwork. The activity can last anywhere from 10 to 30 minutes.

For this activity, students need to understand the following vocabulary:

- **Portrait**: A portrait is a picture, painting, sculpture or another artwork of a person.
- **Background**: The background is what is behind the person in a piece of artwork.
- **Foreground**: The foreground is what is in front of the person in a piece of artwork.

VTS consists of three main questions:

- **What’s going on in this picture?**
- **What do you see that makes you say that?**
- **What more can we find?**

The teacher who is facilitating the activity should do the following:

- Paraphrase comments neutrally. In other words, rephrase what the student says. DO NOT judge what is said or say that the student’s ideas are right or wrong.
- Point at the area being discussed.
- Link and frame student comments. For example, if student #1 assigns meaning to an aspect of a piece of the portrait and student #2 elaborates on that same aspect, be sure to make that connection.

For more information on VTS, visit their site online at www.vtshome.org where you can also watch videos of VTS in action.

**Procedure:**

- Present one pair of images at a time.
- Take about 20 seconds to silently look at the images as a group.
- Begin a classroom discussion asking the first open ended question.
- Follow up with whatever the student says with the second question.

When you paraphrase what the student says, it achieves the following goals:

- Let’s the student know that you heard them.
- Helps everyone in your class hear the comment the student made.
- Encourages other students to answer the question.
- Be sure to keep the conversation going by asking, “What else can we find?”
- If a student says something that is not based on what can be found by looking at the picture, reframe the conversation by asking, “Does anyone see something different?” But remember to not tell the student that they are wrong – this is a sure way to shut down everyone’s willingness to speak up.

Once you have exhausted the three basic questions of VTS, you can keep the conversation going by asking any of the following:

- **What’s the difference between the two images? What do you see that makes you say that?**
- **What is the same and what is difference between the two portraits?**
- **How do you think the people feel in each of the portraits?**
- **What kind of clothes are they wearing?**
- **What are the people looking at in each portrait?**
- **How are the clothes similar or different from the clothes you are wearing?**
- **Why do you think the sculpture artist took the heads off the people?**

You can conclude the VTS session by asking the students

- **What is the story of each portrait we looked at?**
- **What do you think the artist wanted to tell us about the person or people in the portrait?**
The learning goals in this resource guide may be adapted to meet the standards in almost any subject or grade level. Due to the themes of the exhibition connected to identity and the complexity of some of the content, much of the content is most easily adaptable to middle school and high school classrooms. However, the content can meet the content standards requirements for many of the elementary grade levels.

**VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS**

To see which Visual Arts Standards are met in each activity, please visit the California Visual and Performing Arts Standards at http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/documents/vpastandards.pdf

**HISTORY/ SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS**


**CREDITS**

All pieces listed are by Toyin Ojih Odutola, 2016. Charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper. Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

p1: Lazy Sunday  
p3: Michaelmas Term  
p5: Donning Face  
p6: A Grand Inheritance  
p7: Newlyweds on Holiday  
p16 (left): Casual Full Dress  
p16 (right): The Bride