Woodson Art Museum

in your classroom

Places, Portraits, and Perspective

National Geographic Photographs and James McNeill Whistler Etchings

Winter 2014 – 2015

Top: James McNeill Whistler, *Thames Police*, 1859, etching and drypoint, Below: James L. Stanfield, *Prince Philip, Windsor, UK*, 1979, ©National Geographic, *50 Greatest* is produced and traveled by National Geographic

Introduction

Chris Johns, *Kalahari Gemsbok National Park, South Africa*, 1996, ©National Geographic, *50 Greatest* is produced and traveled by National Geographic

A snowy winter in north central Wisconsin doesn't preclude the experience of a hot and dusty, late-afternoon sandstorm; the thick air and sweet smells of a lush tropical forest; or the lapping water and quiet evening chatter of Parisian youth boating on the Seine, courtesy of iconic images from acclaimed *National Geographic* magazine.

Transcendent etchings by James McNeill Whistler offer gritty harbor views of the Thames River and intimate interior scenes of sailors at a pub offer passport-free travel to nineteenth-century London.

Flamboyant and whimsical masks convey the playful and skilled ballet performances of the Central Wisconsin School of Ballet.

Allow the varied and captivating artwork in three new exhibitions – *50 Greatest National Geographic Photographs, James McNeill Whistler: Realism in Print*, and *En Pointe: Central Wisconsin School of Ballet Unmasked* – on view through February 22, 2015 to transport you and your students to exotic places, emotionally charged experiences, and significant periods in art history.

Connecting these three distinct exhibitions featuring photographs, prints, and dance masks are stories told through powerful images, detailed depictions, and childhood caricatures. Share these stories with students using the materials that follow, along with a visit to the Woodson Art Museum's galleries this winter and explore global themes of humanitarian and environmental struggle, creative genius, and the relationship between the visual and performance arts.

National Geographic

The *National Geographic Society* was founded in January 1888, with the first issue of the magazine debuting in October of the same year to eager Victorian audiences. Founding president Gardiner Greene Hubbard wrote:

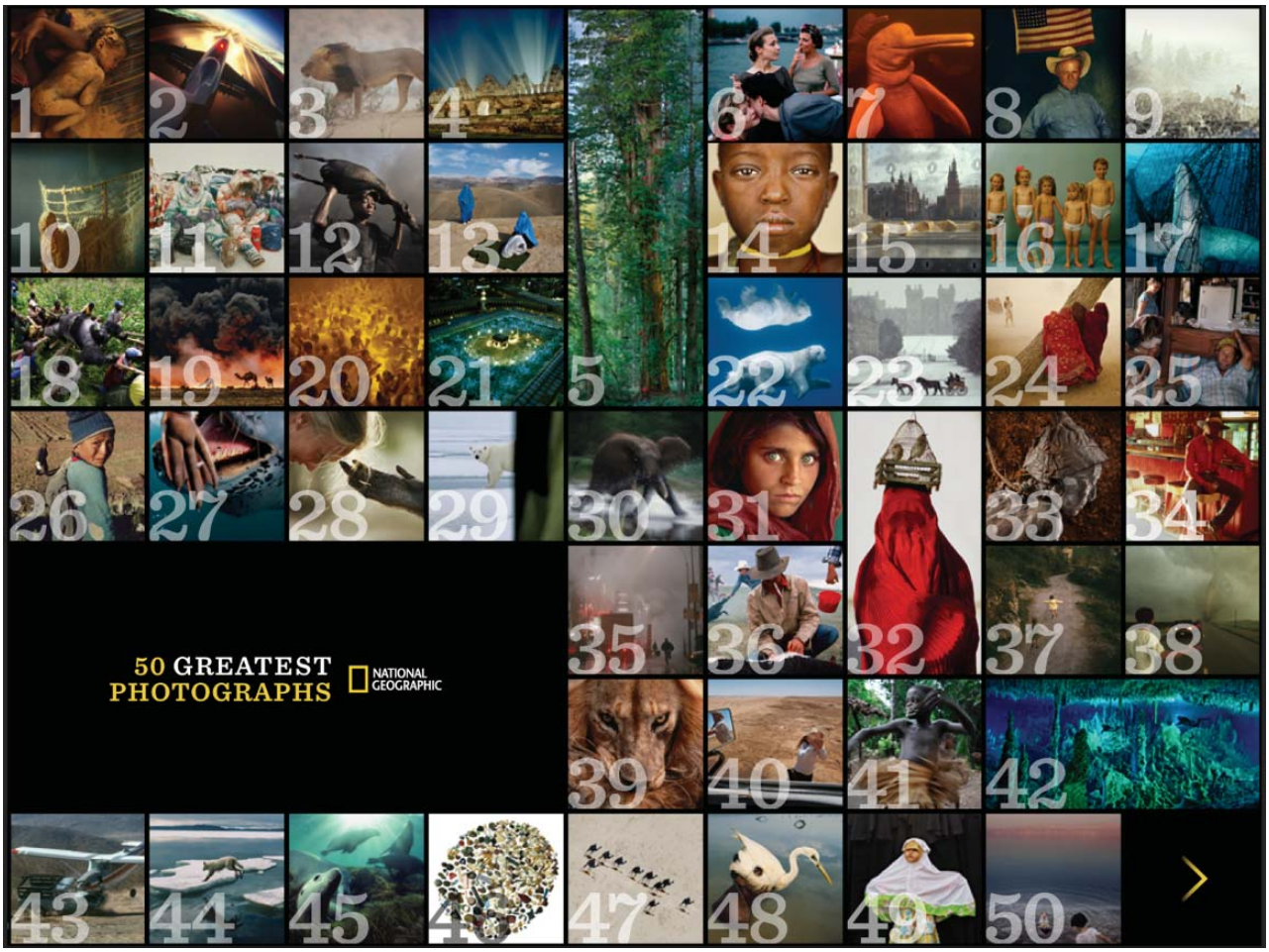
"I am not a scientific man, nor can I lay claim to any special knowledge that would entitle me to be called a 'Geographer.' Our Society will . . . include that large number, who, like myself, desire to promote special researches by others so that we may all know more of the world upon which we live."

With strong roots in discovery and documentation of foreign events, the reputation of the magazine has evolved to become a pioneering voice in the fields of conservation, equality, and scientific innovation. This reputation is well deserved and hard earned as evidenced by the publication's history of "firsts" in the field of photography. Highlights include:

- 1905: First major publication of a photographic series in a magazine featuring images of Lhasa, Tibet
- 1909: Photographs of the North Pole debut in the magazine following the Society-supported expedition led by Robert E. Peary
- 1912: Following the Society's support of Yale University's excavation, the magazine publishes the first photographs of the ancient Incan city of Machu Picchu, Peru
- 1924: Images of New Mexico's Carlsbad Cavern mark the first underground color photographs ever taken.
- 1935: High-altitude photographs taken from helium balloons inflight showcase the curve of the earth and mark the first images ever shot from the stratosphere
- 1962: First images published of an American in combat during Vietnam war
- 1985: Documenting the discovery of the Titanic by Robert Ballard, Emory Kristof's images of the sunken ship are met with praise by eager *National Geographic* readers

Today, *National Geographic* is on the forefronts of journalism and photography, acting as both an aesthetic trendsetter and canary in the coal mine for international current events and movements.

Exhibition Highlights



Recognized by millions, Steve McCurry's portrait of a 12-year old Afghan refugee is believed to be one of the most famous photographs of the twentieth century. McCurry's portrait debuted on the cover of *National Geographic* in 1985. The young woman, later identified by McCurry and a dedicated group of locals as Sharbat Gula, is from Afghanistan's Pashtun tribe, one with a notoriously violent and conflict-ridden history. Sharbat Gula's story was a familiar one for many in the rural region – a young girl who lost her family, home, and sense of safety following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Steve McCurry, *Afghan Border, Pakistan,* 1984, ©National Geographic
50 Greatest is produced and traveled by National Geographic

McCurry reconnected with his now-iconic subject seventeen years later following a challenging search for her whereabouts reminiscent of locating the proverbial needle in a haystack. Despite the challenges of following leads in a low-tech and rapidly changing landscape filled with transient and often isolated communities, McCurry and Gula met again behind the camera in 2002. In a follow-up article in the magazine, author Cathy Newman described the woman's changed appearance and harrowing journey:

"Time and hardship have erased her youth. Her skin looks like leather. The geometry of her jaw has softened. The eyes still glare; that has not softened. 'She's had a hard life,' said McCurry. 'So many here share her story.' Consider the numbers. Twenty-three years of war, 1.5 million killed, 3.5 million refugees: This is the story of Afghanistan in the past quarter century."

Sam Abell, *Moscow, Russia,* 1983, ©National Geographic
50 Greatest is produced and traveled by National Geographic

While some of the images featured in *50 Greatest* evoke powerful memories of historic events, others, like Sam Abell's pear-lined windowsill in Moscow, offer quieter, carefully composed scenes that represent the hallmark aesthetics of photography. Repeated shapes, variations in light, playful configurations of subjects framed within layers of space and depth highlight the sophistication and subtlety of great photography.

Whistler's Etchings

James McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1,* also called *Portrait of the Artist's Mother*, 1871, oil, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

American painter and printmaker James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) is most recognized for his iconic depiction of a subdued, elderly woman, seated in profile against a bare wall. *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* is more commonly referred to as "Whistler's Mother." The oil painting represents one style and medium of this prolific artist, whose theories on the value and perceptions of art changed the fine arts forever.

Born July 11, 1834 in Lowell Massachusetts to father and noted engineer George Washington Whistler and beloved mother Anna Matilda McNeill, James McNeill Whistler's affinity for the arts and his flare for drama began at a young age. The Whistler family moved to Russia when Czar Nicholas I tapped Whistler's father to build a railway between St. Petersburg and Moscow; the bright and charismatic boy claimed Russia as his birthplace into adulthood and the artist's affinity for European life was realized.

James McNeill Whistler, *La Vieille aux loques,* 1858, etching

Following the death of his father, a failed attempt at a West Point education, and his experiences working as a draftsman mapping the U.S. coast, the young Whistler gave in to his love of sketching and desire to see the world. Determined to become an artist and pursue this path abroad, Whistler set his sights on Europe where intellectual and creative inspiration was abundant. Paris was the preferred location for aspiring artists and Bohemian intellectuals during the mid-to-late-twentieth century, but Whistler chose London for the majority of his career and as the backdrop for his work.

The etchings featured in *Realism in Print* represent two distinct periods for Whistler – early and late in his career – and show the artist's evolution of style and technique. Subjects in Whistler's prints include intimate portraits of London's lower classes, the industry and culture of the Thames River, and the harbor views of tall ships and sprawling bridges over water. Whistler found the seedy, grimy, and busy atmosphere of London's riverside captivating despite the art world's perceptions of these subjects as pedestrian and undesirable.

Additional aesthetic influences included the work of Dutch painter and printer Rembrandt van Rijn and, newly available to the West, Japanese arts and antiquities, which proved to be incredibly popular and influential for twentieth-century European artists. Whistler had access to large and diverse archives of Rembrandt etchings and studies thanks to his brother-in-law's private collection, which introduced the artist-in-training to etching techniques, the power of *chiaroscuro* – extremes in light and dark – and how careful use of line can offer suggestions of or spotlight spaces and subjects. Many art historians deem Whistler "the other Rembrandt" for his mastery of etching techniques and moving portraits.

Whistler is further recognized for his progressive and vocal insights into the role and value of art. As pre-Impressionist artist, yet still influenced by the revolutionary philosophies of Realist artist Gustave Courbet and leaders of the Barbizon School, Whistler championed the inherent worth of art – "art for art's sake" – and rejected the need for art to teach a lesson, weave an intellectual narrative, or cater to the preferred subjects of the elite. The European movement of "Aestheticism" included artists who adopted and promoted these ideals and are celebrated for "making the case for beauty."

James McNeill Whistler, *Eagle Wharf*, 1859, etching

Before Your Visit

Looking at the Big Picture

National Geographic photographers are known for their bold and passionate portrayals of challenging and heartfelt subjects. Civil unrest, climate change, social justice campaigns, and environmental degradation are some of the larger narratives behind the magazine's images. Use the links (to images featured in the exhibition) and the information provided to explore these "big picture" themes.

The Environment

Using the images below as a springboard for discussion.* Invite conversation on the ways in which people connect to and interact with the natural world and the sometimes rare or threatened animals that inhabit it.

* Additional images available through the National Geographic "50 Best Photos" app – available for download through Apple and Google Play stores.

Chris Johns, *Lake Assal, Djibouti*, 1989, ©National Geographic
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Dean Conger, *Siberian Reindeer, Oymyakon, Russian,* 1974, ©National Geographic
50 Greatest is produced and traveled by National Geographic

Fuel for Discussion

• To better understand the spectrum of fragile species on our planet, share the following environmental classifications of species with students. The categories listed below apply to both flora and fauna. These definitions and distinctions have been organized by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), whose "Red List" of threatened species is highly respected in the scientific community.

- Vulnerable: A species is considered vulnerable when biological and ecological factors can be identified that often lead to extinction unless action is taken to halt or control these factors. Examples of inherently vulnerable biological factors include:
    - Endemic species: Those found only in one specific area of the world
    - Species with highly specific ecological requirements: Specific breeding grounds, selective dietary requirements, or pristine living conditions

- Endangered: Endangered species are considered to be at a moderate risk of extinction, with observable negative trends in habitat loss and quality, population stability, and number of reproducing adults.

- Critically Endangered: A species is considered critically endangered when it meets specific criteria outlined by IUCN and thus, is considered at to be at high risk for extinction. Some of these criteria include:
    - Severely fragmented habitat or plants known to exist only in a certain location
    - Extreme fluctuations in population size
    - Dramatic decline in distribution of habitat and habitat quality

- Extinct in the Wild (EW): A species is extinct in the wild when its only survival is through some form of human intervention. Species living in captivity or as a naturalized population outside its historic or usual range in a somewhat controlled environment that are not known to survive outside of these constraints can be considered extinct in the wild. Researchers and conservation biologists have a significant burden of proof to prove a species is in fact not found surviving in the wild.

- Extinct (EX): A species is considered extinct when the last individual of a species undoubtedly has died. Proving extinction is an exhaustive process involving extensive in-depth field research, surveys, and research with historic data. For this reason many species often are assumed extinct but have not been declared as such due to a lack of unequivocal evidence.

Consider . . .

- What can an image communicate about the state of a living species that a written description or natural history specimen cannot?
- How do you think photographs may benefit or hinder conservation efforts?

Global Gender Roles and Politics

The images featured in *50 Greatest National Geographic Photographs* offer insights into the diversity of life and cultures on our planet and allow viewers to reimagine their lives under

different circumstances. Be it a young girl attending school in a refugee camp tent, flirtatious Parisian teens boating on the Seine, or young Mbuti Pygmy boys "becoming men" through rites of passage deep in the jungles of the Democratic Republic of Congo – these images expand horizons and encourage acceptance and reflection on the notion of "cultural norms." Invite students to discuss what they are grateful for and what they find challenging about the role gender plays in shaping social expectations and daily life.

Thomas J. Abercrombie, *Afghan Woman, Kabul*, 1967,
©National Geographic
50 Greatest is produced and traveled by National Geographic

Thomas Abercrombie's portrait of an older Afghan woman running market errands shares with viewers a glimpse of one woman's preferred traditional dress during a time of changing styles and more relaxed "dresscodes." The portrait can be interpreted as both somber and vibrant – for some a cloaked woman may symbolize a restricted lifestyle or outdated gender roles but others may chose to focus on the caged finches purchased at the market as pets perched atop the woman's head.

Multiple perspectives and respect for other ways of life are key when encountering other cultures soley through images. Ask students to ponder and articulate multiple narratives and scenarios when viewing images in *50 Greatest* or copies of *National Geographic* or other publications.

Images as Inspiration for Creative Writing

Many images in the *50 Greatest National Geographic Photographs* exhibition reflect specific people, places, and scenarios, but simultaneously lend themselves to imagined contexts and characters. Use the creative writing process known as "ekphrasis," which originates from elaborate descriptions of the art and objects of beauty or cultural significance in ancient Greece. Today, the exercise can be used as a means to appreciate, interpret, and engage with visual arts through writing. Using the images provided below (and throughout these materials), invite students to write a short story or poem inspired by a photograph.

Michael Nichols, *Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park, California,* 2009, ©National Geographic
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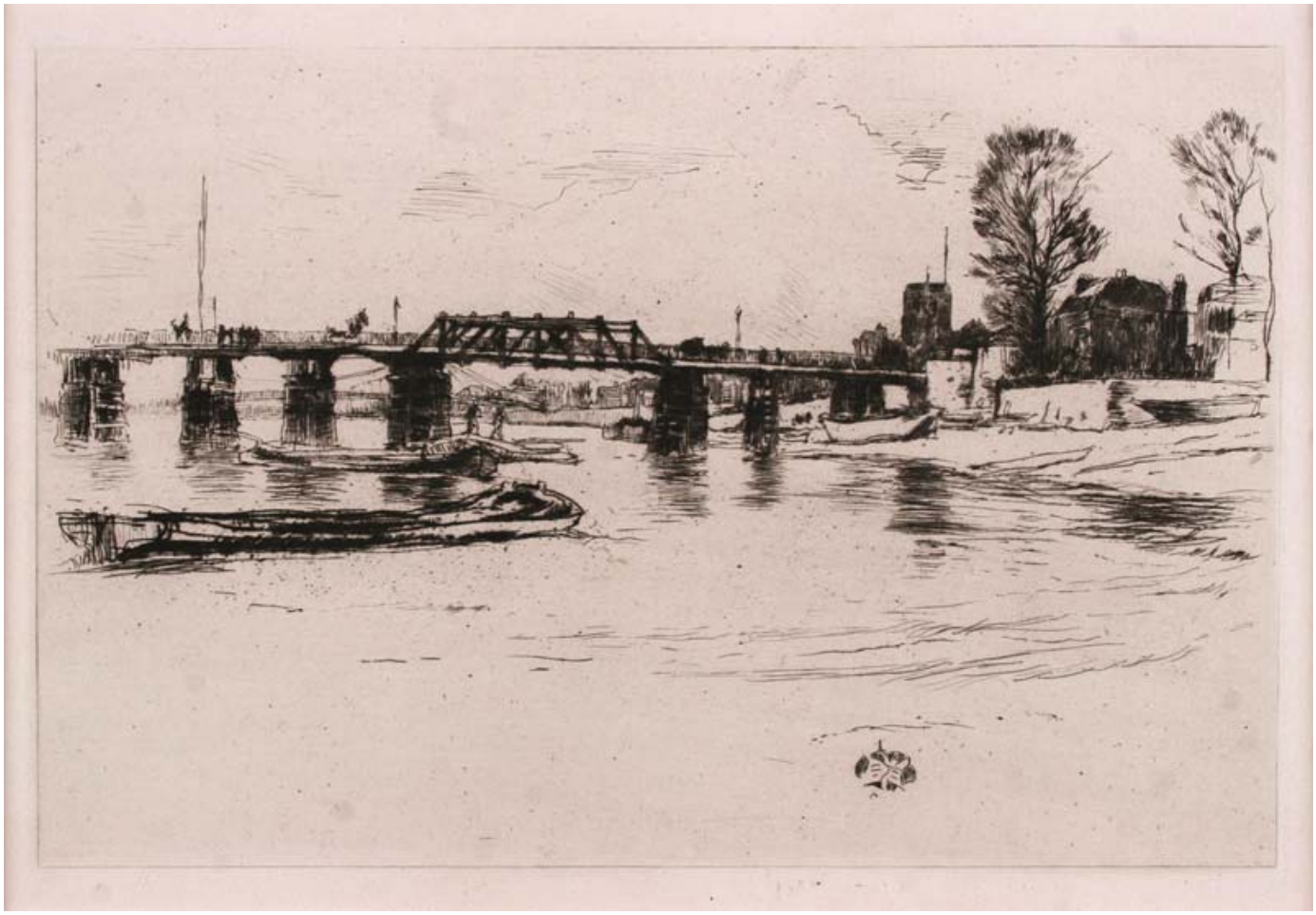
Joanna B. Pinneo, *Sub-Saharan Mali*, 1997, ©National Geographic
50 Greatest is produced and traveled by National Geographic

Emory Kristof, *North Atlantic Ocean*, 1991, ©National Geographic
50 Greatest is produced and traveled by National Geographic

Makers' Marks

A "chopmark" or "chop" is a studio art term for a symbol used by printmakers and print workshops as a mark of identification, which functions almost like a mark of authenticity. The chop may be applied with ink (printed) or simply stamped (embossed). James McNeill Whistler adopted the chopmark following his introduction to Asian prints and ceramics, which he collected throughout his life. Here are four examples of chopmarks Whistler developed and used in his etchings. Identified by many as reminiscent of a butterfly, Whistler designed his marks by experimenting with his initials and signature on prints (see below). Have students design their own chopmark for their future artistic endeavors – invite them to try symbols and stylized variations of their initials, just as Whistler did.



James McNeill Whistler, *Fulham*, 1879, etching

@ the Woodson

During your visit to the Woodson Art Museum, a docent will lead your group through the galleries offering insights and encouraging thoughtful dialogue inspired by artwork on view. All docent-led Art Museum Experiences involve opportunities for hands-on art making for students eager to replicate a favorite artwork on view or an idea discussed. Students will create a small original print inspired by the distinct lines and values found in Whistler's etchings. Beginning in the *Realism in Print* exhibition, students will use magnifying glasses in pairs to focus in on Whistler's impressive draftsmanship and detail of hatched and crosshatched lines. Drawing on Styrofoam with small tools to create their own Whistler-inspired design, students will leave the Museum with an original print that represents a historical art technique.

Activity Guides

Each participant on a docent-led Experience receives an Activity Guide to extend learning and enrichment beyond the Museum and as a way to share the visit with friends and family.

Woodson Art Museum Information

Please encourage your students to visit the Museum again. Admission is ALWAYS free. The Museum is open 9 am – 4 pm, Tuesday – Friday, and Noon – 5 pm on Saturday and Sunday. On the first Thursday of every month – Night Out @ the Woodson – the Museum remains open until 7:30 pm offers hands-on art for all ages from 5:30 – 7 pm. Call the Woodson Art Museum or visit the website for more information:

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