

Museum  
Of  
Contemporary  
Art

Toronto Canada



Educator Resource: Elementary

# Jeff Wall Photographs 1984–2023

October 19, 2025 — March 22, 2026



# Exhibition Overview

Jeff Wall's exhibition, aptly titled *Jeff Wall Photographs 1984–2023*, fills all three floors of MOCA Toronto. This show features over 50 works of art from his forty-year long career. Explore the museum filled with his unique style of photography: large back-lit Cibachrome lightboxes. He prints photos on transparent paper and illuminates them from behind, a display style usually used in advertisements and cinema. Here, Wall uses lightboxes to display his large photographs as fine art in a museum, rather than an advertisement at a bus stop. Wall also produces monumental sized black and white and colour prints. His subject matter ranges landscapes and interiors, to explorations of texture and details, to discussions of human struggles of today.

These photographs have travelled around the world: exhibited in Switzerland, in England, in Portugal, in Italy and finally here in Toronto. Each time, the museums present the same photographs in new ways, shaped by the gallery or museum, the curators choices and then each visitor seeing the works. Here at MOCA Toronto, Wall returns to his home country of Canada.

## Jeff Wall

Jeff Wall was born in Vancouver in 1946, where he lives and works. His interest in art began at an early age, stemming from seeing prints of important works from art history. He began to draw and paint, and with the support of his parents, he began to work in a make-shift painting studio in his backyard in high school. He studied art history and became a professor, teaching in England and Canada.

He didn't start his career as a photographer until he was over 30! Now, he is known for being one of the most influential photographers of the contemporary era. His work helped make photography a form of fine art through his process of creating staged photographs that tell stories important to today's culture. He was one of the first to use back-lit structures to present large-scale photography as art.


***This resource aims to supplement visits MOCA Toronto from elementary groups during Jeff Wall's 2025–2026 exhibition. It is designed for educators: offering context, discussion questions and in-class activities that consider the Ontario Curriculum for Visual Art, Science and Language.***

# Discussion Questions


## Grades K-5:




Have you ever taken a photo? What did your photo look like?



What story do you think Wall is trying to tell here? How can you tell?




People say that photographs are like windows into different parts of the world. Which photo would you want to go inside?




Photographs use one of your senses: sight. Use your imagination: what sounds might you hear here? What do you think this photo smells like? What could the objects in this photo feel like? What would it taste like?


## Grades 6-8:




What do you already know about photography? Have you ever used a camera?




Jeff Wall often creates his photos like a film set, photographing things he has seen or imagined. Can you tell that some of these are staged? Why or why not?



Jeff Wall photographs things he sees in society that are unfair. Can you figure out what things he is concerned about?



Jeff Wall creates photos inspired by things that he saw in real life, that he wasn't able to take a photo of. Have you ever wanted to take a photo but you were not fast enough?



Is there anything you can see that doesn't look like it could happen in real life? Did you spot any photos that might be edited or not quite real?

# Activity | Art, Science and Language Grades 1-5

## Suncatcher Scenes [45 minutes]

### Objective:

This activity aims to engage students with Jeff Wall's innovative photographic lightboxes and explore transparency for primary students.

### Materials:

- Acetate (overhead projector transparencies)
- Window markers
  - Note: you may swap these for little pieces of colourful tissue paper and school glue
- Construction paper frames
- Markers

### Before you begin:

As preparation, start by cutting out a rectangle out of a piece of construction paper to create a frame. The width of the frame should be roughly 1 inch or large enough to easily glue to the acetate sheet.

Before the craft begins, discuss what it means for something to be transparent or translucent. Brainstorm other things that appear to be see-through. Then, show examples of Wall's photography and other uses of lightboxes.

### Introduction questions:

- Wall sets up his photos like a play or a movie: he finds a place, brings props and hires actors. Look at his photos: what is the story?
- How else can we communicate with pictures? What is your favourite way of telling a story? How do you like being told a story?



### Instructions:

1. Choose one of Wall's photographs as inspiration.
2. Each student will create their version of the photograph by using window markers on transparent paper. A blank sheet of white paper behind the drawing will help them see what they are doing if their desk is a darker colour.
3. Once the students have finished their drawings, set the acetate aside. Now, they can decorate their paper frame using regular markers.
4. Glue their frames onto their transparent paper. Let it dry. Present works by hanging in a window to let the light through, just like a lightbox!

### Extension: Language

Once the students have completed their drawing and are waiting for the glue to dry, they can work on writing 2-3 sentences about their drawing. These complete sentences should describe the student's scene.



# Activity | Art & Language Grades 6-8

## Foreground, Middleground, Background [45 minutes x 3]

**Objective:** Students will draw a figurative scene inspired by Jeff Wall.

**Before you begin:** Looking at photographs by Wall, try identifying the foreground, middleground and background of each!

### Materials:

- Scrap paper
- Pencil crayons
- Pencil
- Scissors
- White paper
- Glue

### Key terms

The background is furthest away from the “camera,” appearing smaller, less-detailed or blurry. Outside, it looks more blue-grey due to atmospheric perspective.

The middleground is closer to the viewer. This part will be more colourful and detailed than the background.

The foreground has closer objects that can look the most crisp, colourful and largest.

The focal point is your subject, where you want people to look at! You can place it in the foreground, eg. a person, in the middleground, eg. a house in a landscape, or in the background eg. the sun.



### Instructions

This activity works best when each step is split up into separate days, giving each layer equal attention and time.

Each student should have the chance to brainstorm and sketch out a rough copy of their scene. This shouldn't be very detailed and should place the background at the top of their scene and the foreground at the bottom. The middleground will be in the middle of the page. At this stage, they should decide where their focal point is and articulate why they chose its location.

Once students are happy with their sketch, hand out 1 sheet of paper. This will be their background. Students will draw their background on the upper third of this page. The bottom  $\frac{2}{3}$  can remain blank. Set this aside.

Next, on a new sheet of paper, draw the middleground. Cut out where the background should show through. This should be about  $\frac{2}{3}$  of a sheet of paper with the bottom  $\frac{1}{3}$  blank.

On a third sheet of paper, draw the foreground. Colour it in. Cut it out, removing everything except the foreground, which should only be roughly  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the paper.

Finally, layer them: starting with the foreground, then the middleground, then the background. If all looks good, glue them together to create your masterpiece!

**Reflection questions:** Why did you choose where you put your focal point? How would your picture change if you moved it to the background, foreground or middleground?





## Ontario Curriculum Connections

### Visual Art

Creating and Presenting.  
Reflecting, Responding  
and Analysing.  
Exploring Forms and  
Cultural Contexts.

### Language

Writing  
Media Literacy

### Science

Light and Sound

## Additional resources for educators

### Read

The Canadian Encyclopedia | [Jeff Wall](#)

MOCA Toronto | [Jeff Wall Photographs 1984–2023](#)

Muse Magazine | [Jeff Wall](#)

### Watch

Louisiana Channel | [Jeff Wall Interview: Pictures Like Poems](#)

White Cube | [In Focus: Jeff Wall 'Life in Pictures'](#) Note: this video includes a photograph that contains nudity.

## Image Credits

**All photographs included are by Jeff Wall.**

*Boy falls from tree*, 2010. Transparency in light box. © Jeff Wall.

*Children*, 1988. Nine transparencies in light boxes. © Jeff Wall.

*Maquette for a monument / to the contemplation / of the possibility of mending / a hole in a sock*, 2023. Transparency in light box. © Jeff Wall. Courtesy Gagosian.

*Fallen rider*, 2022. Transparency in light box. © Jeff Wall. Courtesy Gagosian.

*The Storyteller*, 1986. Transparency in light box. © Jeff Wall.