



Seeing Art in a Historical Context: An Activity to Promote Visual Literacy

Overview

Designed for middle school students and educators, this activity aims to teach the critical skill of “reading” a work of art. Students are encouraged to consider their prior knowledge of the historical period and to make inferences about the artist’s circumstances and possible intent. After completing this activity, students will have honed a technique enabling them to better examine and interpret art in historical context.

Suggestions for Implementation

This lesson is ideal for, but not limited to, a class that is planning on visiting the Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM), either in-person or via videoconference.

Central to the activity is a graphic organizer, which focuses a series of questions on one piece of art. Questions pertain to the artwork’s historical period, the artist’s point of view, and other contextual factors. The graphic organizer can prepare students to understand and view critically a particular work of art that they will see in the Museum or via videoconference. For students who cannot visit SAAM, this activity remains a valuable tool for learning how to critically examine visual art, especially works that are clearly related to a particular historical era or theme.

Consult the attached list of SAAM’s tour themes (with historical periods noted in parentheses). Each tour topic includes key images, which you can preview via the Internet. From this list, you and your students can select an image to study using the graphic organizer. Ask students to complete the graphic organizer handout, and discuss their responses with the class.

To process the graphic organizer responses, we have included follow-up writing prompts. Ask students to complete one or more writing exercises to help them refine their ideas. This section provides a final product for assessment.

Extend the Activity

For each of the Museum’s tour themes, we have selected two images (see the attached list). The two images differ significantly, offering a compare and contrast opportunity.

Select a topic and have students complete a graphic organizer for each of the two artworks. Working either in groups or as a class, students then create a Venn diagram that compares and contrasts the two objects. Finally students might write individually about the differences and similarities, or they could present their observations in groups.

Pre-Visit Activity
Middle School

Artwork: _____
 Artist: _____
 Date/Time Period: _____

List at least two things you already know about this time period.

1.	3.
2.	4.

Directions: As you look at this artwork, fill in the Student column. The class will then discuss the artwork together and you will write notes in the Class column about the discussion.

	Student	Class
First Impression <i>What words first come to your mind when you see this artwork?</i>	1. 2. 3.	
Mood <i>What feelings was the artist expressing?</i>	1. 2. 3.	
Historical Details <i>List three details you see that reflect the time period.</i>	1. 2. 3.	
Connect <i>How do the mood and historical details relate to each other?</i>	1. 2. 3.	

Writing Activities

Directions: Please write a complete paragraph for each activity.

- A. Imagine you are able to have a conversation with the artist of this artwork. What questions (at least three) would you ask him/her? Why? Answer this question as a dialogue and pay special attention to punctuation!
- B. Using the chart you have completed above (with the student and class columns), write a detailed paragraph describing this artwork. Include examples you thought of by yourself and with your class.
- C. How does this artwork reflect the time period in which the artist painted it? Use your knowledge of history and what you have learned about this artwork.

Key images for SAAM Tours

For each of the tours, two images have been selected to represent very different aspects of the same theme. Images can be accessed through the links provided.

Tour Theme	Image One	Image Two
America's Signs and Symbols	<p><i>Miss Liberty Celebration</i> 1987 <u>Malcah Zeldis</u> oil on corrugated cardboard 54 1/2 x 36 1/2 in. (138.4 x 92.7 cm) 1988.74.14 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1988/1988.74.14_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>George Washington</i> ca. 1845 <u>Henry Brintnell Bounetheau</u> Copy after Gilbert Stuart watercolor on ivory 6 1/8 x 5 in. (15.6 x 12.7 cm) rectangle 1946.3.15 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1946/1946.3.15_1a.jpg</p>
Art and Literature	<p><i>The Headless Horseman Pursuing Ichabod Crane</i> 1858 <u>John Quidor</u> oil on canvas 26 7/8 x 33 7/8 in. (68.3 x 86.1 cm.) 1994.120 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1994/1994.120_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>St. Nicholas</i> ca. 1837 <u>Robert Walter Weir</u> oil on wood 29 3/4 x 24 1/2 in. (75.5 x 62.1 cm.) 1977.51 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1977/1977.51_1a.jpg</p>
Beating the Odds: African-American Women Artists	<p><i>Old Arrow Maker</i> modeled 1866, carved 1872 <u>Edmonia Lewis</u> marble 21 1/2 x 13 5/8 x 13 3/8 in. (54.5 x 34.5 x 34.0 cm.) 1983.95.179 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1983/1983.95.179_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Snoopy Sees Earth Wrapped in Sunset</i> 1970 <u>Alma Thomas</u> acrylic on canvas 47 7/8 x 47 7/8 in. (121.6 x 121.6 cm.) 1978.40.4 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1978/1978.40.4_1a.jpg</p>
Catlin's Quest	<p><i>Assiniboine Indians Pursuing Buffalo on Snowshoes</i> 1846-1848 <u>George Catlin</u> oil on canvas 19 1/2 x 27 1/2 in. (49.6 x 70.0 cm) 1985.66.558 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1985/1985.66.558_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Kee-o-kúk, The Watchful Fox, Chief of the Tribe, on Horseback</i> 1835 <u>George Catlin</u> oil on canvas 24 x 29 in. (61 x 73.7 cm) 1985.66.1A http://americanart.si.edu/images/1985/1985.66.1A_1a.jpg</p>

Contemporary Craft	<p><i>From a Birmingham Jail: MLK</i> 1996 <u>L'Merchie Frazier</u> silk, photo transfer, gel medium, dyes, and beads 40 x 42 in. (101.6 x 106.7 cm) 2002.41 http://americanart.si.edu/images/2002/2002.41_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Game Fish</i> 1988 <u>Larry Fuente</u> mixed media 51 1/2 x 112 1/2 x 10 3/4 in. (130.8 x 285.6 x 27.3 cm) 1991.61 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1991/1991.61_1a.jpg</p>
Folk Art: Beyond the Everyday	<p><i>Miss Liberty Celebration</i> 1987 <u>Malcah Zeldis</u> oil on corrugated cardboard 54 1/2 x 36 1/2 in. (138.4 x 92.7 cm) 1988.74.14 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1988/1988.74.14_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Fan Quilt, Mt. Carmel</i> 1893 <u>Residents of Bourbon County, Kentucky</u> mixed media 85 x 72 1/4 in. (215.9 x 183.5 cm.) 1987.80 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1987/1987.80_1a.jpg</p>
Free Within Ourselves: African American Artists	<p><i>Café</i> ca. 1939-1940 <u>William H. Johnson</u> oil on paperboard 36 1/2 x 28 3/8 in. 1967.59.669 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1967/1967.59.669_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Evening Attire</i> 1922 <u>James VanDerZee</u> gelatin silver print on paper mounted on paperboard sheet: 10 x 8 in. 1994.57.3 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1994/1994.57.3_1a.jpg</p>
From Sea to Shining Sea: American Landscapes	<p><i>High Cliff, Coast of Maine</i> 1894 <u>Winslow Homer</u> oil on canvas 30 1/4 x 38 1/4 in. 1909.7.29 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1909/1909.7.29_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Golden Gate Bridge</i> 1934 <u>Ray Strong</u> oil on canvas 44 1/8 x 71 3/4 in. 1965.18.50 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1965/1965.18.50_1a.jpg</p>
A House Divided (Civil War)	<p><i>The Sick Soldier</i> ca. 1863 <u>Studio of Mathew B. Brady</u> albumen print on paper mounted on paperboard sheet and image: 5 5/8 x 7 7/8 in. 1994.91.32 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1994/1994.91.32_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>A Visit from the Old Mistress</i> 1876 <u>Winslow Homer</u> oil on canvas 18 x 24 in. 1909.7.28 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1909/1909.7.28_1a.jpg</p>
Latino Art and Culture	<p><i>Vaquero</i> modeled 1980/cast 1990 <u>Luis Jiménez</u> acrylic urethane, fiberglass, steel armature 199 x 114 x 67 in. 1990.44 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1990/1990.44_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>El Chandelier</i> 1988 <u>Pepón Osorio</u> mixed media 60 7/8 x 42 in. (154.6 x 106.7 cm) diam. 1995.40 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1995/1995.40_1a.jpg</p>

Lure of the West (Westward Expansion)	<p><i>Among the Sierra Nevada, California</i> 1868 <u>Albert Bierstadt</u> oil on canvas 72 x 120 1/8 in. 1977.107.1 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1977/1977.107.1_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Wi-jún-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going To and Returning From Washington</i> 1837-1839 <u>George Catlin</u> oil on canvas 29 x 24 in. 1985.66.474 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1985/1985.66.474_1a.jpg</p>
Native Americans	<p><i>Wi-jún-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going To and Returning From Washington</i> 1837-1839 <u>George Catlin</u> oil on canvas 29 x 24 in. 1985.66.474 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1985/1985.66.474_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Young Omahaw, War Eagle, Little Missouri, and Pawnees</i> 1821 <u>Charles Bird King</u> oil on canvas 36 1/8 x 28 in. (91.8 x 71.1 cm) 1985.66.384,222 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1985/1985.66.384.222_1a.jpg</p>
Neighborhood and Nation	<p><i>Sunlight and Shadow</i> 1941 <u>Allan Rohan Crite</u> oil on board 25 1/4 x 39 in. 1977.45 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1977/1977.45_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Bird's-eye View of the Mandan Village, 1800 Miles above St. Louis</i> 1837-1839 <u>George Catlin</u> oil on canvas 24 1/8 x 29 in. 1985.66.502 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1985/1985.66.502_1a.jpg</p>
New Voices, New Visions	<p><i>Vaquero</i> modeled 1980/cast 1990 <u>Luis Jiménez</u> acrylic urethane, fiberglass, steel armature 199 x 114 x 67 in. 1990.44 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1990/1990.44_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii</i> 1995 <u>Nam June Paik</u> 49-channel closed circuit video installation, neon, steel and electronic components approx. 15 x 40 x 4 ft. 2002.23 http://americanart.si.edu/images/2002/2002.23_1a.jpg</p>
Picturing America	<p><i>Manhattan</i> 1932 <u>Georgia O'Keeffe</u> oil on canvas 84 3/8 x 48 1/4 in. (214.3 x 122.4 cm.) 1995.3.1 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1995/1995.3.1_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Employment of Negroes in Agriculture</i> 1934 <u>Earle Richardson</u> oil on canvas 48 x 32 1/8 in. (121.8 x 81.6 cm.) 1964.1.183 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1964/1964.1.183_1a.jpg</p>

Reshaping American Life (The New Deal)	<p><i>Achelous and Hercules</i> 1947 <u>Thomas Hart Benton</u> tempera and oil on canvas mounted on plywood 62 7/8 x 264 1/8 in. 1985.2 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1985/1985.2_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Automotive Industry (mural, Detroit Public Library)</i> 1940 <u>Marvin Beerbohm</u> oil on canvas mounted on board 78 x 184 in. 1968.141 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1968/1968.141_1a.jpg</p>
To See is to Think: Visual Literacy	<p><i>Mrs. James Smith and Grandson</i> 1776 Charles Willson Peale oil on canvas 36 3/8 x 29 1/4 in. 1980.93 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1980/1980.93_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>We Both Must Fade (Mrs. Fithian)</i> 1869 <u>Lilly Martin Spencer</u> oil on canvas 72 x 53 3/4 in. 1970.101 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1970/1970.101_1a.jpg</p>
Urbanized America	<p><i>Elizabeth Winthrop Chanler (Mrs. John Jay Chapman)</i> 1893 <u>John Singer Sargent</u> oil on canvas 49 3/8 x 40 1/2 in. 1980.71 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1980/1980.71_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Cumulus Clouds, East River</i> 1901-1902 <u>Robert Henri</u> oil on canvas 25 3/4 x 32 in. 1992.91 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1992/1992.91_1a.jpg</p>
We the People	<p><i>Mrs. James Smith and Grandson</i> 1776 <u>Charles Willson Peale</u> oil on canvas 36 3/8 x 29 1/4 in. 1980.93 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1980/1980.93_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>Mississippi Freedom Marcher, Washington, DC</i> 1963/printed 1982 <u>Roy DeCarava</u> gelatin silver print on paper sheet: 10 7/8 x 13 7/8 in. 1992.15.1 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1992/1992.15.1_1a.jpg</p>
Young America (1750-1850)	<p><i>Mrs. George Watson</i> 1765 <u>John Singleton Copley</u> oil on canvas 49 7/8 x 40 in. 1991.189 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1991/1991.189_1a.jpg</p>	<p><i>The Great Horseshoe Fall, Niagara</i> 1820 <u>Alvan Fisher</u> oil on canvas 34 3/8 x 48 in. 1966.82.1 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1966/1966.82.1_1a.jpg</p>