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. 
2. 
3. 
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.

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

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For information contact:  
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Education Office  
Phone: 202-275-2323  
E-Mail: SAAMEdStaff@si.edu
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.*

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Artist/s</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Image Link</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contemporary Craft</strong></td>
<td>From a Birmingham Jail: MLK</td>
<td>L’Merchie Frazier</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>silk, photo transfer, gel medium, dyes, and beads</td>
<td>40 x 42 in. (101.6 x 106.7 cm)</td>
<td><a href="http://americanart.si.edu/images/2002/2002.41_1a.jpg">http://americanart.si.edu/images/2002/2002.41_1a.jpg</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Folk Art: Beyond the Everyday</strong></td>
<td>Game Fish</td>
<td>Larry Fuente</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>mixed media</td>
<td>51 1/2 x 112 1/2 x 10 3/4 in. (130.8 x 285.6 x 27.3 cm)</td>
<td><a href="http://americanart.si.edu/images/1991/1991.61_1a.jpg">http://americanart.si.edu/images/1991/1991.61_1a.jpg</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fan Quilt, Mt. Carmel</td>
<td>Residents of Bourbon County, Kentucky</td>
<td>1893</td>
<td>mixed media</td>
<td>85 x 72 1/4 in. (215.9 x 183.5 cm.)</td>
<td><a href="http://americanart.si.edu/images/1987/1987.80_1a.jpg">http://americanart.si.edu/images/1987/1987.80_1a.jpg</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>From Sea to Shining Sea: American Landscapes</strong></td>
<td>High Cliff, Coast of Maine</td>
<td>Winslow Homer</td>
<td>1894</td>
<td>oil on canvas</td>
<td>30 1/4 x 38 1/4 in.</td>
<td><a href="http://americanart.si.edu/images/1909/1909.7.29_1a.jpg">http://americanart.si.edu/images/1909/1909.7.29_1a.jpg</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Golden Gate Bridge</td>
<td>Ray Strong</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>oil on canvas</td>
<td>44 1/8 x 71 3/4 in.</td>
<td><a href="http://americanart.si.edu/images/1965/1965.18.50_1a.jpg">http://americanart.si.edu/images/1965/1965.18.50_1a.jpg</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Visit from the Old Mistress</td>
<td>Winslow Homer</td>
<td>1876</td>
<td>oil on canvas</td>
<td>18 x 24 in.</td>
<td><a href="http://americanart.si.edu/images/1909/1909.7.28_1a.jpg">http://americanart.si.edu/images/1909/1909.7.28_1a.jpg</a></td>
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Smithsonian American Art Museum, Education Office
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<tr>
<th>Lure of the West (Westward Expansion)</th>
<th>Native Americans</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Among the Sierra Nevada, California</em></td>
<td><em>Wi-jún-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going To and Returning From Washington</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1868</td>
<td>1837-1839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert Bierstadt</td>
<td>George Catlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oil on canvas</td>
<td>oil on canvas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72 x 120 1/8 in.</td>
<td>29 x 24 in.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977.107.1</td>
<td>1985.66.474</td>
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<th>Neighborhood and Nation</th>
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<td><em>Wi-jún-jon, Pigeon's Egg Head (The Light) Going To and Returning From Washington</em></td>
<td><em>Bird's-eye View of the Mandan Village, 1800 Miles above St. Louis</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1837-1839</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Catlin</td>
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<tr>
<td>oil on canvas</td>
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<tr>
<td>29 x 24 in.</td>
<td>24 1/8 x 29 in.</td>
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<td>1985.66.474</td>
<td>1985.66.502</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Sunlight and Shadow</em></td>
<td><em>Vaquero</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>modeled 1980/cast 1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allan Rohan Crite</td>
<td>Luis Jiménez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oil on board</td>
<td>acrylic urethane, fiberglass, steel armature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 1/4 x 39 in.</td>
<td>199 x 114 x 67 in.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1977.45</td>
<td>1990.44</td>
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<td><em>Vaquero</em></td>
<td><em>Employment of Negroes in Agriculture</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modeled 1980/cast 1990</td>
<td>1934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis Jiménez</td>
<td>Farle Richardson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>acrylic urethane, fiberglass, steel armature</td>
<td>oil on canvas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>199 x 114 x 67 in.</td>
<td>48 x 32 1/8 in. (121.8 x 81.6 cm.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990.44</td>
<td>1964.1.183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://americanart.si.edu/images/1990/1990.44_1a.jpg">Link</a></td>
<td><a href="http://americanart.si.edu/images/1964/1964.1.183_1a.jpg">Link</a></td>
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Reshaping American Life (The New Deal)

*Reshaping American Life (The New Deal)*

**Achelous and Hercules**
1947
Thomas Hart Benton
tempera and oil on canvas mounted on plywood
62 7/8 x 264 1/8 in.
1985.2

**Automotive Industry (mural, Detroit Public Library)**
1940
Marvin Beerbohm
oil on canvas mounted on board
78 x 184 in.
1968.141
http://americanart.si.edu/images/1968/1968.141_1a.jpg

To See is to Think: Visual Literacy

**Mrs. James Smith and Grandson**
1776
Charles Willson Peale
oil on canvas
36 3/8 x 29 1/4 in.
1980.93

**We Both Must Fade (Mrs. Fithian)**
1869
Lilly Martin Spencer
oil on canvas
72 x 53 3/4 in.
1970.101

**Elizabeth Winthrop Chanler (Mrs. John Jay Chapman)**
1893
John Singer Sargent
oil on canvas
49 3/8 x 40 1/2 in.
1980.71

**Cumulus Clouds, East River**
1901-1902
Robert Henri
oil on canvas
25 3/4 x 32 in.
1992.91

Urbanized America

**Mrs. James Smith and Grandson**
1776
Charles Willson Peale
oil on canvas
36 3/8 x 29 1/4 in.
1980.93

**We the People**

**Mrs. James Smith and Grandson**
1776
Charles Willson Peale
oil on canvas
36 3/8 x 29 1/4 in.
1980.93

Mississippi Freedom Marcher, Washington, DC
1963/printed 1982
Roy DeCarava
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

Young America (1750-1850)

**Young America (1750-1850)**

**Mrs. George Watson**
1765
John Singleton Copley
oil on canvas
49 7/8 x 40 in.
1991.189

**The Great Horseshoe Fall, Niagara**
1820
Alvan Fisher
oil on canvas
34 3/8 x 48 in.
1966.82.1
http://americanart.si.edu/images/1966/1966.82.1_1a.jpg

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