

Seeing Art in 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 painting 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 or 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.

Graphic Organizer
Seeing Art in Historical Context

Artwork Title:

Artist Name:

Date/Time Period:

Describe 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.

	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.	

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Writing Activities

Directions: Please write a complete paragraph for each activity.

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

Key images for SAAM Eye Opener Tours

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

Tour Theme	Image One	Image Two
Young America (Colonial era and the new nation)	<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>
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>
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>
Urbanized America (urbanization in late 19 th and early 20 th centuries)	<p><i>Elizabeth Winthrop Chanler (Mrs. John Jay Chapman)</i> 1893 John Singer Sargent 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 Robert Henri oil on canvas 25 3/4 x 32 in. 1992.91 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1992/1992.91_1a.jpg</p>
Harlem Renaissance	<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>
Reshaping American Life	<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.</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.</p>

Our Mid-Century Crisis	<p>1985.2 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1985/1985.2_1a.jpg <i>Cape Cod Morning</i> 1950 <u>Edward Hopper</u> oil on canvas 34 1/8 x 40 1/4 in. 1986.6.92 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1986/1986.6.92_1a.jpg</p>	<p>1968.141 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1968/1968.141_1a.jpg <i>Sculpture Group Symbolizing World's Communication in the Atomic Age</i> 1959 <u>Harry Bertoia</u> braised and welded brass and bronze 142 1/4 x 231 1/4 x 81 in. 1979.107 http://americanart.si.edu/images/1979/1979.107_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>
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>
To See is to Think	<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>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>
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>
From Sea to Shining Sea	<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>