

OBSERVING AN ARTWORK

Name of Work: _____

Artist: _____

What is an observation exercise?

This exercise is an invitation and encouragement for you to become engaged, through thoughtful and extended looking, with artworks you plan to use for your Art Masterpiece program. Your discoveries of the object will come from the *visual experience* of observation *before* you begin researching the work(s) you have chosen.

How does observation encourage and enhance experiences with an artwork?

We may think we're seeing all there is to see when we look at an artwork. But looking at art in ways that provide a meaningful experience requires more than a brief glance. Significant aspects of an artwork are often *invisible* at first. But, objects *gradually reveal* themselves when we allow time for *patient observation* and are open to receive what the artwork has to offer. We'll be looking longer to see what *awaits* us in the work and to see what captures our attention, piques our curiosity, and invites our responses. During our initial observations of an object, extended looking will help us discover features that the artist meant for us to ponder and to enjoy.

This exercise is for *initial observation* of a work. We are not meant to uncover *everything*. Some things that may at first be hidden will reveal themselves the longer we look. Don't be tempted to jump over the *observable features* of the work in trying to analyze, interpret or draw conclusions; discover what the work reveals through observation. This observation exercise is for *extended looking* and *staying increasingly engaged* with the work. "If you do not give 'looking time' when first encountering a work, the work loses the chance to speak for itself."

How does an observation exercise help you prepare an Art Masterpiece experience for the class?

Once you have chosen your artwork to share with the class, the observation exercise is a great starting point to become familiar with the object. You will get to "see" the work in some of the ways your students will when they see it for the first time. The things you initially discover will be many of the things the students will uncover. As you look longer, those things that reveal themselves to you will be many of the same things that the students will explore. The questions you have about the work will be many of the same questions about which your students will be curious. Those things you are curious about can guide you in your research, planning your presentation and choosing activities.

Below are things to consider as you are looking, followed by questions to guide your looking. It may be helpful to you to write brief responses to the questions.

Ready? Consider the following as you start your observation:

- a. Resolve to look for at least one-half hour. (Yes, on this one image!)
- b. Turn the work over to your eyes; the experience will uncover many thoughts and raise questions.
- c. Notice interesting features.
- d. Let questions come to you; don't be concerned with seeking answers. (Raising questions is an important part of the observation experience.)

As you look longer....

e. When you need to, look away for a time and then look back to *refresh* your eyes.

f. Discover *new* features and *re-see* features you found before but now in the context of the whole work. Enjoy the experience of finding your way around the work.

g. Let what you know inform your looking –what you know in general, about art, and about what’s depicted in the work. What you as an individual bring to the object *influences your observation*. This is a reminder to us that each viewer comes to an artwork with different experiences and knowledge. But, don’t be concerned if nothing is readily familiar in the work; that is not unusual. The students will also bring their background experiences to the work.

Here are some questions to help guide your observations:

1. *Briefly* describe the thing(s) you *initially* noticed as you first observed the work.

2. Describe the work in more detail using what you can *actually see*.

3. What is surprising to you in the work...a startling color, an object, something unexpected?

4. What do you see now that you didn’t notice at first? What has *revealed* itself?

5. Look for *mood and personality* projected in the artwork. List some *descriptive words* that express the mood and/or personality of the work for you.

6. Where has the artist placed you, the viewer, in relationship to the work?

7. How does the use of space in the work feel to you (e.g., open/filled in; flat/dimensional)?

8. Look for hints of time and place. What clues do you see regarding time and place?

9. Look for motion. Many works depict motion directly and vividly; others do not represent action, but the lines, texture and forms carry a powerful message of motion. If you sense motion, how is it conveyed to you?

10. Notice how the composition of the work moves your eyes around the object.

11. Make mental changes; imagine changing a color, or the medium. What does that uncover about the work?

12. There are things awaiting discovery. What features do you think the artist probably wants you to find and savor?

13. Look for cultural and/or historical connections. What indications, if any, of these connections are present?

14. Identify something that interests you and/or puzzles you. Write questions asking what you’d like to find out about.

15. In general, compare your initial thoughts/experiences with the work with the thoughts/experiences that came with looking longer.

16. What do you think you’ll remember about the work?

Source material: *The Intelligent Eye: Learning to Think by Looking at Art* by David N. Perkins; Harvard Project Zero; Harvard Graduate School of Education.