



### **ART CRITICISM ACTIVITIES**

Both of the following activities utilize study prints that include information printed on the back. We recommend the Take 5 Art Prints and the Multicultural Art Prints-MAPS series available from Crystal Productions (for a free color catalog, call 1-800-255-8629). In Activity I, students work solely from the visual evidence in the work of art, so they should not read the information on the back until they have finished the writing assignment. In Activity II, students should first read the information on the back, then develop an imaginative interpretation or writing based on the facts available.

## COMPARE/CONTRAST TWO WORKS OF ART WITH A VENN DIAGRAM

Comparing and contrasting art works is a useful strategy for art criticism. Choose two art works that share a common theme or subject, or two works by the same artist. In the open area of the circle on the left, write words that are true only of art work #1. In the open area of the circle on the right, write words that are only true of art work #2. Where the two circles overlap, write words that are true of both. On a separate paper, use your words to write a compare/contrast paragraph.



## **DECIPHERING FACT AND OPINION**

Works of art unlock many educational doors that sometimes are difficult for certain learners to open. Placing art images at the center of learning helps both mainstream and challenged students translate abstract language arts concepts into concrete understanding. The success that results from this enriched learning experience is reflected in students' improved oral and written discourse.

One language arts problem that often confuses students is differentiating between fact and opinion. Works of art assist with visualization of the rules that govern these two contrasting notions. This lesson demonstrates how finding meaning in artworks helps young learners discriminate between fact and opinion.

### **Materials**

3" x 5" paper for writing  
pencils  
a poster size art reproduction  
masking tape  
one large sign that reads "Fact" and one large sign that reads "Opinion"

### **Motivation**

Display an art image so all students may see it. Allow a few moments for careful, silent observation of the work. Briefly, discuss the difference between a fact and an opinion. A fact is properly defined as something that is true or real, actually exists, or has occurred. An opinion falls short of absolute knowledge and is a conclusion or judgment that cannot be proven to be true.

### **Procedure**

1. Tape the "Fact" sign to one side of the reproduction and the "Opinion" sign to the other.
2. Distribute writing paper, and ask each student to write one complete sentence about the image.
3. Ask each student to read aloud the sentence they wrote. Then, classify the sentence as a fact or opinion.
4. Tape the sentence under either the Fact or Opinion sign, depending on the category that has been chosen by the writer.
5. In collaborative groups, students decide if the sentence has been correctly classified. Require justified reasons for placement in either category.
6. When most students agree and have given valid reasons for the placement of the statement, continue until all other sentences have been read, sorted, and justified as fact or opinion.
7. Ask students to re-evaluate individual sentences. Determine if each sentence is a fact or an opinion or if any sentences should be moved to the opposing category.

8. Divide students into two collaborative groups, a Fact Group and an Opinion Group. Students whose sentences comprise the Fact Group compile their work to create a descriptive paragraph about the image. Typical information in this group could include the title and date of the work of art, the name of the artist, materials used, where the image is now located, its country of origin, or other fact-based critical chronicles. Students whose sentences make up the Opinion Group combine their work to write a paragraph indicating judgments about the image such as the artist's craftsmanship, effective use of the elements of art and principles of design, or if the image is liked or disliked. Characteristic information should lead the reader towards interpretation, the artist's intent, or viewer perception of the work of art.

### **Conclusion**

Observing works of art, discussing them, and writing about them offer many varied opportunities for learning. This fact and opinion activity should expand beyond the initial objective and encompass additional research that bolsters the students' first statements. Questions and extensions are numerous and rich with any art object that is thoughtfully investigated. Bridging the curriculum with meaningful activities centered upon finding meaning in art images and objects prepares students for future learning by building a strong foundation that broadens as knowledge continues to grow.

-- Adapted from:

Stephens, P.G. and Green, S.D. (1997). Deciphering fact and opinion. *School Arts*, 97(3), p.40-42.

## **USING ART REPRODUCTIONS IN THE CLASSROOM: RESPONSES FROM THE INTERNET**

Working with a wide range of teachers and schools over a number of years, NTIEVA's staff has experienced firsthand the benefits of using art reproductions in the classroom. Though we certainly recognize that there is no substitute for the original work of art, reproductions offer opportunities for all students to learn about art, especially if they have little or no access to art museums. We applaud the efforts of the many art education publishers who continue to produce and make available affordable, quality art reproductions.

In an effort to compile a collection of useful strategies for using art reproductions in the classroom, we asked this question over the Internet: "Do you use art reproductions in the classroom? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?"

Here are some of the great responses we received:

**Marcia Thompson, West Salem, Wisconsin, [Mcracker@aol.com](mailto:Mcracker@aol.com):**

I use large reproductions for introducing a new concept, teaching about a specific artist, talking about a specific theme in art, enriching the classroom environment, introducing vocabulary, doing activities in art criticism, connecting student work to established artists' work, sharing with classroom teachers, and introducing the idea of a museum. I keep files of medium-sized reproductions on artists, cultures, and topics such as architecture and ceramics in my classroom. These are used by me in some of the same ways as listed above and are also used by students for doing research, reports, etc. These are primarily prints that I have collected from magazines, visits to museums, etc. I have them laminated and use them also in displays. They are organized alphabetically and are always accessible to student.

I use small reproductions (postcard size and smaller) for the same uses as above but also in games and group activities in art criticism, aesthetics, and art history. I also have them use some of the smaller ones in their sketchbooks or in creating mini museums out of clay or cardboard.

**Diane Jaquith, [Didij@aol.com](mailto:Didij@aol.com):**

I use art reproductions in my K-5 art classes for a variety of purposes. Most often, I bring in large reproductions as motivators in beginning a new unit. For example, first grade does an architecture project which begins with Frank Lloyd Wright's "Fallingwater" as an example of an unusual house; we can learn about architects, sites, and architectural features. When fourth graders explore their community in group collage, we look at Romare Bearden's "Block" and compare his neighborhood with our own.

Sometimes I bring in culturally diverse reproductions on a particular theme and show them after students have been working for a few weeks on a unit such as portraits. Groups try to guess as much as they can about the subject, culture, and artist from clues within the artwork, and then we share our information. It's also really fun to work with

kindergarten students, because they are great observers. We often begin art class by looking at a work of art to make the transitions into art.

**Carol Wyrick, National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.,**  
[si.wp.06.nmaa.carol2@ic.si.edu](mailto:si.wp.06.nmaa.carol2@ic.si.edu):

Using postcards in group sorting activities and follow-up discussion is one way to create an effective anticipatory set for students prior to introduction of new classroom material. Students sort the images into categories selected and agreed upon by the group and defend their choices with the rest of the class in the discussion that follows. Responses typically included classifications such as subject, New vs. Old, Masculine vs. Feminine, chronological order, media, and Emotional vs. Intellectual appeal.

**Kay Alexander, donkay@earthlink.net:**

Here's a use for large art reproductions that is interdisciplinary and also a good lead-in to using them for criticism activities. I call it "Students Have a Write to Art." The procedure is similar to "webbing," or "clustering," a method familiar to elementary/middle school teacher. Demonstrate the procedure to the entire class by placing a selected artwork on the chalkboard and asking a student to give it a one-word or brief title; write it on the board. Ask another to elaborate that title with a further word or short phrase.

As students volunteer more words, attach them to the key word, or, when they open a new idea, begin a new cluster. After half a dozen related clusters have been formed, ask a student to build a sentence using the words in one group, then another and another, as in topic and support sentences in a paragraph. Encourage vivid adjectives and action verbs. As you can see, this process leads into descriptive and imaginative paragraphs that can become a story or "composition about a composition."

As students become familiar with this procedure they can build their own individual clusters from small reproductions, independently, or they can work in pairs or small groups, cooperatively. They can read their rough drafts to the class and then write them up in polished form to post next to their reproductions on the bulletin board. Some pictures that work especially well are paintings by Henri Rousseau, Marc Chagall, Jacob Lawrence, and Winslow Homer, but don't overlook works by lesser known artists in your collection. Incidentally, any lesson that invites students to talk about art is helpful with ESL kids as they apply the new vocabulary directly to the image being discussed.

**Michael Delahunt:**

At each of two K6 schools I've used small rooms as galleries apart from the art classrooms. I could annex these spaces only by making alliances with music and literature people so we could combine our efforts in putting together exhibits in which ALL teachers could teach interdisciplinary lessons. So the gallery is for studying visual art, listening to music, and reading and writing, too. We each saw that by combining our efforts we could do much more than any of us could do alone. With the support of our principal, PTO, and business partners, we completely transformed the interior of these rooms: building in a bank of storage closets, resurfacing walls, adding carpeting and

track-lighting, etc. At one of these schools we called our gallery "The Humanities Forum." Each has contained as many pieces of original work as I could beg, borrow, or create myself, but most pieces were either reproductions or mass-produced. Beyond using this resource with my own students, however, I take it as a major goal preparing other teachers to use it with their classes. Each of the gallery committee members shares his expertise by writing and publishing lessons which classroom teachers can use with their kids.

**Teri Brudnak, Corona del Mar High School, Newport Beach, California,  
Kandrbrt@aol.com:**

I first gave my 3-D design students postcard reproductions from the Koon's series of sculptures "Ushering in Banality" (Michael Jackson and Bubbles, Three Puppies, Bear and Policeman and the famous Puppy made from flowering plants). I asked them as groups to write about their reproductions in the manner suggested by Terry Barrett: "What are you looking at? What do you see?" Then I asked them to describe what the work was about and how did they know? The last question (before I showed the video) was: "Do you think this is a work of art? Where would you see this - in a major museum, in a gift shop, or an interior design store or maybe even in a swap meet? (Many students thought the work was from a gift shop)." We then watched a video of a 60 Minutes program about the contemporary art market that included the artist Jeff Koons. I asked the groups to again write about the work with the new information they saw in the tape. Many students were indignant that the artist has others make his work, many were surprised that this is the work of a very well known contemporary artist. Many didn't think his work was art - especially the series of vacuum cleaners! We had a lot of fun with this exercise and I hope it gave students something to ponder the next time they see contemporary art that is difficult to understand.

**Tina Arndt, [carndt@sylvania.sev.org](mailto:carndt@sylvania.sev.org):**

I use art reproductions in many ways, but I also use them in ways which are not related to the project at hand, but serve as a means of art appreciation through what I like to call "osmosis." The students are surrounded by art on a constant basis. Each table in my room has a postcard reproduction by artist; the artist's name becomes the name for that table. The students must know the name to be dismissed, to know if they are the helper table, to know if they are the table I am complimenting, etc.

Also each week interested students may try to guess the "Mystery Artist," who is featured through a different reproduction every Monday on the art room door. Students come in before school starts and whisper their guess in my ear. The librarian and I have books they can use to research if needed. The first ten right get their names added to the school announcements, the first five also get a small treat, and everyone who gives the correct answer gets certificate. I have students as young as second grade who participate and this year I had two students in the sixth grade who only missed one week. They are allowed to give me an answer once each day up until announcements on Tuesday morning. I have had up to 68 students correct ("Mona Lisa") to only one or two correct with artists such

as Red Grooms. I have been doing this program for six years and it has continued to grow in popularity.

Another program that works quite well is my art pins. Every day I wear a different pin by an artist or culture. As my students are waiting in line for their teacher, I accept guesses (this also gives them incentive to clean up quickly and quietly get in line). I go down the line until someone gets it right then that student gets a treat. As the students suggest answers, I try to reinforce their efforts with clues. For example, if the pin is Monet and someone guesses Renoir I tell them, "You are close, it is an Impressionist." Some students come to check out the pin that morning to research it before class.

In March for Youth Art Month I have a contest in which I wear all my art pins. My first year I had 60; this past year I wore 250 (for three days). Students are able to give answers before school, at lunch, during my planning period, and after school. They can also bring in books or other resources to help them. This year I was amazed - I had a second grader that got 37 right and several sixth graders who got over 100 right. Each student that participates gets a certificate with the amount they got correct, each student who gets a certain amount right gets a small prize, and the top student in each grade and in the school also gets a prize. This program has led to a general interest in the pin I am wearing. It makes the students, teachers, and parents curious. They ask or guess and then I throw in any information I can, adjusted for the student's grade level or for an adult. Often this leads to a discussion on the price of art.

**Marilyn Juda-Orlandi, Scuola Elementare, Monte Porzio Catone, (RM) Italy:**

I have quite a large collection of art reproductions, poster size, that I have collected over the years. It seemed such a waste to keep them rolled up in my studio for lack of space so I suggested to the elementary school principal that we choose one each month to hang in the school entrance and make it a theme study in all the classes. The first one we chose was a reproduction of a Chagall, but with no written indication of who the artist was or a title. We decided to put it up with no further explanation and then after a week see how observant the children had been. The reproduction was a female figure with long black hair, a red dress, and a bouquet of flowers in her hand, floating on a deep blue background with four yellow moons, two green horses in the right-hand corner and a very large red and yellow chicken (or duck?) in the lower left corner. The fourth grade class wrote a theme on their impressions. The teacher gathered them all together and gave me a copy, and I would like to share parts of them with you. They are priceless! (This is a translation from Italian so it may not come across as well as it does in the original language. The school is an elementary school near Rome, Italy).

"Out there in the entrance hall there is something new. I ask myself why did they put it there? I think it represents the Madonna. In my opinion they put it there to protect the school."

"The painting reminds me of a woman on a pilgrimage walking at night. The painting is abstract and the artist was inspired by a pilgrim who didn't know what road to take: the

one with the horses or the one with the ducks. The painting gives an artistic touch to the entrance hall of the school."

"I think they hung it in the hall because otherwise the entrance would be very poor, not in the economic sense, but in the artistic sense. It was put there for another reason, too: to allow us to enter the world of culture. In the future we can tell our children how beautiful culture is."

When we then went on to study Chagall I made photocopies of Chagall's autobiography "My Life" to read in class. For example, he writes about being so poor he couldn't buy canvas and so painted on sheets, tablecloths, and nightshirts. He would buy a herring and eat the head one day and the tail the next. The students then saw other reproductions of his work and noticed that in his paintings anything could happen, just like in dreams . . . people floating in the air, blue horse, etc. . . . So we then had a project to remember a dream and paint it. It was a very freeing experience for them to realize they could let their imaginations run wild and anything could happen in the paintings they created. We got some wonderful results. After that we changed the poster in the entrance hall once a month and did Van Gogh (his letters to his brother make good reading material), Picasso, Miro, and others. It was quite successful."

## **USING MATERIAL CULTURE METHODS TO INTERPRET ART OBJECTS**

Works or objects of art reflect the times, places, and cultures in which they are produced. This is especially important to consider in studying objects from cultures that may be unfamiliar to us. According to Thomas Schlereth, "Material culture study attempts to explain why things were made, why they took the forms they did, and what social, functional, aesthetic, or symbolic needs they serve." While generally applied to historical studies, the material culture models discussed below can be applied to art objects to provide an increased understanding of their cultural context. Art is a product of culture, too!

The Nine Models listed below are based on Schlereth's work and were introduced to me when I was in graduate school at the College of William and Mary/Colonial Williamsburg Museum Studies Program. I used them in history museums with decorative arts collections for seven years and then brought the Models with me to art museums. I have been particularly interested in issues of multiculturalism and the Models have worked very well with cultural art collections.

Recently, I have begun using the Models with American paintings, prints and drawings. The Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, which opens in October, has a large collection of regional art that reflects the land, society and politics of the Midwest. The Models have helped our docents and the students we have done outreach with to better understand the art.

I have listed the Models below and have added some general sample questions that could be used with either cultural objects or visual arts. You may find that not all Models that will apply to every work.

### **Nine Models of Material Culture Interpretation**

#### **Art Historical**

The role an object plays in a historical context. This includes traditional aesthetics methods such as those outlined in Edmund Burke Feldman's *Variety of Visual Experience*, Discipline-Based Education, Broudy Aesthetic Scanning, etc.

#### **Symbolic**

The role an object holds in society. Does this object /work serve a role in society? For example, does it have religious connotations? Does it connote power? Does it signify wealth? Are there parts of this work that have specific symbolic meanings? For example, what does a dove symbolize in a Christian painting? Etc.

#### **Cultural**

The developmental characteristics of an object which can be related to a culture. Does this object have a style that is specific to a particular cultural group? How can you tell that this was made by a particular group of people? What are its unique characteristics?

Recently we have looked at how the Regionalist artists reflected the cultural politics of the 1930s.

### **Functional**

The way the object is used. How did the person who made this object intend to be used? Is it used differently today? Is a religious painting hanging in a museum being used the same way the artist intended?

### **Structuralist**

How the object is made. What are the materials and tools used to create this object?

### **Environmental**

The role of the physical environment on works. Does what this object is made of reflect a certain part of the world? For example, an African mask might reflect the natural resources available to make it.

### **Behaviorist**

The interaction of the object with human behavior patterns. Is this work created to change people in some way? For example, many works by Regionalist artists were used as propaganda - a means of perpetuating the Midwestern work ethic.

### **Community**

The interaction of the object and society. How does this object fit within a community? Would everyone in a community view an object the same way? Does this reflect the views of the community? For example, one might investigate the role of the ancestor spirits living in African masks within the community.

### **Social History**

Also known as the provenance or history of the object. Who made this object? Who owned it?

## **Using the Models**

These models can be used in various ways. I have given younger students a set of questions that have been developed from the Models to help them investigate an unknown object such as the mask pictured here. I have had students "be the curator," using the Models as a guideline to interpreting the object. The Models also make excellent guidelines for expository writing assignments.

### **Mask Analysis**

First, describe the mask so a blind person could visualize it.

1. What is this mask made out of? How was it made? What tools were used?
2. Where does it come from? How old is it? How does it reflect place and time?
3. What was the mask used for (ceremonial, theater, funerary, fun - be specific)?

4. Who wore the mask(man/woman/child, profession, living/dead)?
5. What sort of character would the masquerader become with the mask on?
6. How was it worn (over the face, top of the head, not at all)? What sort of movements or noises might accompanying its wearing?
7. What values might have been placed on the mask (monetary, power, status, religious)?
8. Has the meaning/usage changed over time, either within or outside of the culture that created it?
9. What personal associations do you have with the mask? How does it make you feel?
10. What does the mask tell you about the people who made it (lifestyles, beliefs, society, etc.)?
11. If this were your mask, how would you use it?

Schlereth, T.J. (1980). *Artifacts and the American past*. Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, p. 3.

## **ART CRITICISM: PARTNER RESPONSE**

Working with a partner, use postcards as a prompt to describe (either verbally or in writing) the work of art (do not let partner see the actual image). While the description is going on, the partner draws his/her interpretation of the artwork. When drawing is complete, then the actual image can be shown and compared (comparison should not be based on drawing skills, but on inclusion of drawing skills).

## MUSEUM ACTIVITY I

Many people have questions about works of art. Interestingly enough, these questions are often very much like those asked by aestheticians. Reflection upon the experience of art, its impact and meaning are the kinds of thoughts considered in the discipline of aesthetics. The museum is filled with works of art that we may use to experiment with aesthetic questions and issues.

**Step 1.** Select a work of art from the museum collection.

**Step 2.** Record below the following information.

Title \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Artist \_\_\_\_\_

Media \_\_\_\_\_

Country of Origin \_\_\_\_\_

**Step 3.** Which one of the following best "fits" this work of art.

- a. Imitational/Representational
- b. Imagination/Fantasy
- c. Formalism (emphasis on design)
- d. Religious
- e. Political
- f. Functional/Decorative
- g. Other

**Step 4.** Write below the reasons you selected this work of art.

**Step 5.** Using as much of your new art vocabulary as possible, describe this work below.

**Step 6.** Describe below the personal "gut" feelings/responses you have about this work.

**Step 7.** Is the present context (a museum in Texas) different from the context at the time it was created? If yes, please explain.

**Step 8.** List below aesthetic questions or issues that this work causes you to consider.

# Questions In Art Criticism

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Art critics help viewers perceive, interpret, and judge artworks. Both art critics and art historians share a strong interest in constructing meaning from artworks. While critics tend to focus more on modern and contemporary art from cultures close to their own, art historians tend to study works made in cultures that are more distant in time and space. In addition to lessons focused on understanding artworks from historical cultures, Chicana and Chicano Space includes modern and contemporary artworks. Lesson [one](#) and lesson [six](#) focus on critical inquiry.

## Questions In Art Criticism\*

1. **Description:** What do I see? (feel, hear, smell, taste)?
  1. **Subject Matter:** Does the artwork depict anything? If so, what?
  2. **Medium:** What tools, materials, or processes did the art maker use?
  3. **Form:** What elements did the maker choose and, how did the maker organize the elements?
  
2. **Interpretation:** What is the artwork about?
  1. **Interpretive Statement:** Can I express what I think the artwork is about in one sentence?
  2. **Evidence:** What evidence inside or outside the artwork supports my interpretation?
  
3. **Judgment:** Is it a good artwork?
  1. **Criteria:** What criteria do I think are most appropriate for judging the artwork?
  2. **Evidence:** What evidence inside or outside the artwork relates to each criterion?
  3. **Judgment:** Based on the criteria and evidence, what is my judgment about the quality of the artwork?

\* based roughly on Terry Barrett's *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary* (1994).