

Tips for Discussing Works of Art

Discussions about works of art can take many forms. Keeping the following suggestions in mind will ensure that the discussion is meaningful and inclusive.

- 1. Looking at art takes time.** In any given lesson or unit plan, you may only have a limited time to look at and discuss a work of art and then proceed with further discussion or activities. However, the richest experiences and discussions regarding art involve time for sustained looking—allowing students to get to know the work of art in a personal, intimate way. Before you begin any specific questioning about a work of art, aim to have students look in silence for at least two minutes.
- 2. Plan the direction of the conversation.** When planning a discussion about a work of art, consider the sequence and direction of the questions you will ask your students as they relate to the overall goals and objectives you have for your lesson or unit. Start with basic questions that build off the quiet, sustained looking period (of at least two minutes) and further encourage direct looking. For example, you might ask students “Where does your eye go first? Why? What else do you see?” Next, encourage viewers to probe their observations more deeply. You may ask them to look for connections between the work and their own experiences. Finally, ask viewers to begin to make meaning of the work or form hypotheses based on their looking, connections to their lives or previous knowledge, and the shared responses of the group. Ask questions like “Based on what we have observed and discussed, what do you think the artist hoped to communicate or express through this work? Why?”
- 3. Use open-ended questions.** In addition to thinking about the sequence of questions, consider the type of questions you might ask. Open-ended questions, rather than closed-ended ones, will allow students to make individual connections to the work and encourage everyone to participate in the sharing of ideas. Open-ended questions request that the learner broaden their perspective and discover new possibilities and potential answers, regardless of whether they think these are the “best” responses. Judgements about their “correctness” should not be made. Close-ended questions tend to “fish” for a certain answer and are more appropriate to testing knowledge and memorization.
- 4. Answers should be grounded in the image.** Encourage students to support their responses with details found within the image. You might ask, “What do you see that makes you say that?” Focusing on images within the work does not preclude information drawn from their individual lives, but such information should directly relate to some visual aspect of the work of art. This helps to keep the conversation focused and also engages specific thinking skills such as observing, questioning, forming connections to make meaning of the work, and creating responses.
- 5. Layer in relevant background information, as appropriate, throughout the questioning session.** Providing information about a work of art before a discussion begins limits the potential for exploration and discovery for individuals and for the groups. It suggests that there is one set of “correct” information and that any personal responses are inferior. Layering in small amounts of background information throughout the discussion, when relevant, can suggest new avenues for deeper consideration. For example, it’s not important to identify the setting of Kerry James Marshall’s painting (below) as public housing at the beginning of the conversation. Rather, allowing the students to explore the men portrayed, their actions, and the setting through observation that engages them with the painting. They will begin to build a relationship with the work and the experience of looking because they will have made discoveries on their own. When asking follow-up questions, however, it

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may be important to explain that this is public housing (if the students haven't already figured that out) or that Marshall grew up in public housing. Students will want to keep this in mind when thinking about why Marshall has portrayed this aspect of American culture. This conversation could be taken deeper by layering in primary source documents that relate to public housing in Chicago. Marshall specifically depicts Chicago Housing Authority project Stateway Gardens in this work. More generally, sources could be added that relate to African American culture, civil rights and racial segregation in America.

6. Be flexible! Discussions about art are inherently subjective. Allowing students to find their own voice and opinions about what they see is a critical part of this valuable and rich experience. The sequence of questions asked, the background information you have prepared, the overall objectives of your lesson may need to shift based on how students respond during the discussion. Be open to this process.



Kerry James Marshall. *Many Mansions*, 1994. Acrylic on paper mounted on canvas. Max V. Kohnstamm Fund