Looking at and Talking about Art with Kids

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If we want to understand a work of art, we should look at the time in which it was created, the circumstances that determined its style and art expression as well as the individual forces that led the artist to his form of expression.

• Viktor Lowenfeld

Since the early 1980s, the field of art education has embraced a comprehensive model of teaching art in schools. One of the basic tenets of this model is that in addition to providing students with opportunities to create their own works of art, teachers should bring them into meaningful contact with works made by adult artists. This is accomplished by structuring integrated learning experiences involving aesthetics, art criticism, and art history along with studio production activities.

Children enjoy looking at and talking about works of art. Teachers can effectively build upon this interest by engaging children in guided discussions about art reproductions shown in class or 'real' works of art shown in museums. In planning these encounters with art, it is important to consider that children base their understandings of and responses to new stimuli on what they know about their own immediate world. It is also important to recognize that children have a questioning frame-of-mind and are often curious about the works of art they see in their everyday lives. Therefore, when working with beginning viewers, teachers should select works of art for study that relate to the experiences and interests of their particular group of students and use their questions and response to guide the art inquiry process.

For instance, children are often eager to talk about works that depict family relationships, other children, animals, sporting events, and familiar activities. Works that are mysterious, strange, or humorous will also capture and hold the attention of most children. While representational works are easier to talk about in class, abstract and nonobjective works can and should be introduced as children become more receptive and knowledgeable of art.

As beginning viewers, children's responses to works of art are often idiosyncratic and unpredictable. They're happy to talk about what they see in a work of art. They're honest and concrete. They're also story-tellers by nature and their responses often reflect a desire to interpret works of art in narrative form. From a teacher's perspective, this means that a question like "What's going on in this picture?" can often lead to a lively classroom discussion. In order to keep the dialogue focused on the work itself, follow-up question like "What do you see that makes you say that?" or "What makes you think that?" are helpful and allow the children to support or revise their answers based on their observations of the work.

It is also important to consider that helping children to understand and to appreciate the art of others is not a matter of simply spewing forth facts and information about the work being shown. Rather, the goal of introducing children to the world of art is to help them to become perceptive and sensitive viewers of the works of art they will encounter in their lives. In order to achieve this goal, children must become actively involved in looking at and talking about art. Learning facts about a particular work is beneficial to this process; but what that work communicates to a child and how it does that is the bottom line! If children are encouraged to become personally involved with the works of art they see, each encounter they have with the world of art becomes more interesting, more meaningful, and more lasting.

The following ideas are intended to suggest ways teachers can help their students to learn more from their encounters with art. Since no grade-level distinctions are given, teachers will need to select or adapt those strategies that are appropriate for their classroom situation, students, and curriculum.

What's so special about a work of art?

Before talk about art begins, children should understand the difference between seeing an original work of art and an art reproduction. A simple way to help establish between the two is to put examples of both on display and than ask children to contrast their difference. For instance, children might notice that:

- A work of art is an original—one of a kind—whereas a reproduction is a printed copy of the original work.
- A work of art may be bumpy and shine differently across its surface whereas a reproduction is even in texture.
- The original work of art is often much larger than a reproduction of the same work.
- The reproduction may not have the same colors as the original work.
- A work of art is more valuable than a reproduction.
- A reproduction can be seen in a book or a store whereas a work of art is often seen in a museum or an art gallery.

What should we look for in a work of art?

Although children tend to focus their attention on subject matter, a work of art has many other aspects that can be observed and discussed. For instance, in looking at and talking about a work of art, children should be encouraged to consider:

Subject Matter—the people, trees, buildings, or objects and the way in which they are represented.
Sensory Qualities—the lines, colors, shapes, values, or textures in the work and how they are organized through harmony, variety, balance, emphasis, and unity.
Emotional Aspects—the emotional quality, meaning, mood, or symbolism in the work and how it is achieved.
Technical Aspects—the medium, materials, processes, techniques, and style employed by the artist to create the work.
Context—the time period and culture in which the work was produced and the ways in which these aspects influenced the subject matter and techniques of communication that the artist used to create the work.

When was it made?

Knowing when a work of art was created can be made more meaningful if children can identity a period of time with something they already know about it. Three ways to help children make such connections are:

Using Visual Clues
Recognizing that things about the work make it appear modern or old (e.g., the way people dress, modes of transportation, the condition of work itself).

Using Personal Time
Relating the work to events within the child's experience (e.g., "This work was made when your grandfather was your age" or "this was made about the time you were born.")

Using Historical Time
Relating the work to a historical event the child is familiar with (e.g., "This work was made during the time of knights and castles.")

George Washington Crossing the Delaware by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, 1851.

What one learns and how one learns is determined in part by the kinds of questions asked.

• **Barry Beyer**

Fat & Skinny **Questions**

Fat and Skinny questions is a strategy for thinking about the differences between questions and the types of answers they require.

Skinny Questions:

- require simple yes, no, maybe, a one- or two-word answer, or a nod or shake of the head;
- take up little space or time;
- offer little information in return;
- use basic recall of factual, literal information to generate a response;
- discourage interaction and result in generally dull discussions.

Fat Questions:

- take time to think through and answer in depth; are open-ended; there is no one right answer;
- require "fat answers" (discussion and explanation);
- require deeper thought through application, analysis, interpretation, synthesis or evaluation;
- encourage interaction and provoke more interesting discussions.

When looking at a work of art, students might be asked to:

describe it.

- What do you see in this picture? What else do you see?
- What words would you use to describe this painting? What other words might we use?
- How would you describe the lines in this picture? The colors? The shapes?
- How would you describe this painting to a person who hasn't seen it?
- How would you describe the people in this picture? How are they like you? How are they different from you?

relate it.

- What things do you recognize in this work of art?
- What does this painting remind you of?
- How is this painting like the one we just saw? How is it different?
- How is this picture different from real life?
- What interests you most about this work of art?

analyze it.

- What is the first thing you notice in this picture? Why does that stand out to you?
- What is the largest and the smallest thing you see in this picture?
- What objects seem closest to you? Further away?
- What can you tell me about the colors in this painting?
- What color is used the most in this painting?
- What do you think is the most important part of this picture? Why?
- How do you think the artist made this work of art?

interpret it.

- What title would you give to this painting?
- What sounds would this painting make (if it could)?
- What can you tell us about the person in this painting?
- What do you think this painting is about? Why do you think that?
- Pretend you are inside this painting. What does it feel like?
- Why do you think the artist made this painting?

evaluate it.

- Why do you think other people should see this work?
- What grade would you give the artist for this painting? Why?
- What do you think is important to remember about this painting?
- How well did the artist do on this work? What makes you say that?

Some essential questions worth exploring in art

- Where do artists get their ideas? What can we make art about?
- What can we make art out of?
- What is art? What isn't art? What is art for?
- What makes some works of art better than others? How can you tell good art from bad art? What criteria should we use?
- What work of art do I hate/love the most and why?
- Why do people make art?
- How does an artist know when a work or art is finished?
- Can anyone make art? Can animals make art?
- Should art be pleasing to the eye? Can art be ugly? Why would an artist make an ugly work of art?
- Should art make people happy? Should art tell a story? What should art do?
- Should artists imitate what they see? In what ways does art represent the world?
- Does something have to be original to be art? Can a forgery or copy be art? When is it okay to copy in art?
- What is an artist? Are artists the same in every culture?
- What are some different ways to approach art? What can we learn from studying a work of art?
- What makes an artwork good? Are standards for determining good artwork the same in all cultures?
- Does art mean the same in every culture? In every group?

Chair by David Hockney, 1985.

Responding to Student Answers

Some constructive ways to respond to student answers include:

- A simple acknowledgment that the student has contributed something.
  "Thank you Jerry for that answer."
- Show that you value the student's contribution by writing it on the board.
- Paraphrase the student's answer or ask another student to do so.
  "What I hear you saying is . . ."
- Ask for clarification.
  "Can you tell me more about that?"
  "What do you mean?"
- Refocus the student's thinking.
  "How does this relate to the work?"
- Summarize the discussion or ask the group to do so.
  "What have we learned from this artist today?"

American Gothic by Grant Wood, 1930.

Art Postcard Games

The following games involve students in "structured play" using small art reproductions to explore art concepts and themes. These games require carefully selecting examples and groups of art works beforehand so as to focus students' attention on certain similarities and differences in works of art.

Interpreting Art Works

[This game requires selecting prints with narrative content] Have pairs of students select 3 or 4 postcards without knowing the purpose of the selection. Teach or review the parts of a story such as "the setting" which is the scene for some action, "the plot" which is the unfolding of the action, and "the climax" of the action. Ask the students to arrange their cards in a sequence to illustrate an imaginary story. Have them present their story to others in oral or written form.

Place a group of cards on a table which are active (abstract or non-objective) or which show narrative action by realistic figures. Have pairs of students select one card without knowing the purpose of the game. Discuss dramatization possibilities together. Determine "rules" of the game (e.g., words or no words, props or no props, etc.,) Provide students with time to figure out the action appropriate to their selected card. Place all cards in a location so everyone can see them. Each group in turn presents their dramatization. The audience then makes informed guesses on which work is undergoing dramatization. Discuss the reasons for choices of action made by the students. Variation: Have students (in groups of 4 to 5) make the "sounds" their selected work would make. The audience then guesses which card was selected.

Classifying and Categorizing Art Works

One of the more interesting games to play with art postcards involves asking students to sort a group of art prints into self-determined categories. Have each group spread the cards out in front of them and then say, "Place these prints into groups that you think go together." Afterwards, have each group explain how they grouped their prints. Identify works which were difficult to classify Are their similarities in the ways groups completed the task?

Sort a group of art prints into theme categories such as landscapes, still lifes, portraits and ideas. Possible subcategories might include real and imaginary events. Share and reflect on the results. Discuss characteristics found difficult to classify.

Classify a group of art prints according to time periods. For example, works completed in the 14th century, 15th century and so on. Select the category containing the largest number of prints and make inferences regarding what the works suggest about the art (and culture) of the time period. Determine ways to verify conclusions drawn. Share results.

Classify art prints according to emotions or moods expressed in the works. Students may invent their own categories or they may be given descriptive words such as "exciting," "playful," "calm, "sad," "indifferent," and "mad" and asked to sort their prints accordingly. Select a work from each category and determine what the artist has done to convey the emotion. Share results. Identify works which were difficult to classify. Discuss the personal and universal quality of emotions.

Sort art prints according to the nationality of the artist. (See back of print.) Compare works within each category and identify similarities. Contrast works among categories and identify differences. Identify interrelationships across groups.

Ordering & Ranking Art Works

Before doing the following activities, the teacher should explain how a continuum consists of two extremes with the middle portion displaying characteristics common to both ends.

Have students rank a group of art prints in order from 1 (least liked) to 10 (best liked) among the group. Share rankings and criteria used to make decisions. Determine why a certain print was ranked fifth and the next one sixth. Decide if the group ranking reflects "popular" values among the public. Conduct a survey to verify conclusions drawn.

Place art prints on a continuum from oldest to most recent. Ask students to draw conclusions regarding the history of art as reflected in their time continuum. Discuss conclusions and indicate the basis for decisions made.

Sequence a group of 10 art prints from the most to least beautiful. Share the criteria used to justify the order. Discuss the personal and universal quality of "beauty."

Place art prints on a continuum according to the depth shown (i.e., infinite/deep space to decorative/flat space). Identify and discuss ways artists show depth in a work (e.g., size, color, overlapping, perspective and so on).

Rank a group of art prints in order from 1 (most significant) to 10 (least significant). Share the criteria used to justify the order. Find examples of "great art" and determine what makes them significant.

Place art prints on a continuum from "active-noisy" to "quiet-still." Select a print and ask "What has the artist done to make this a . . . . painting?" Try other polar pairs such as warm/cool, lonely/crowded or sharp/soft.

Have students invent their own art postcard games to play.

People around the world make art to:

- seek personal enjoyment and satisfaction.
- express personal thoughts and feelings
- communicate with others.
- create a more favorable environment.
- make others see more clearly.
- provide us with new visual experiences.
- record a time, place, person, or object.
- commemorate important people or events.
- reinforce cultural ties and traditions.
- seek to affect social change.
- tell stories.
- heal the sick.
- adorn themselves.
- explain the unknown.
- worship.
- create an illusion or magic.
- predict the future or remember the past.
- earn a livelihood.
- do something no one else can (or has yet done).
- amuse themselves (or make us laugh).
- make the ordinary extraordinary.
- increase our global understanding.

This mask represents "The Cannibal of the Mountains" and was used in a secret winter ceremonial, British Columbia, around 1900.

Try This: Display examples of art from various cultures and time periods. Ask students to speculate on the possible reasons why the art was made.

Christina's World by Andrew Wyeth, 1948.

Art teaches thinking skills

Looking at and talking about art encourages these thinking skills: observing, recalling, analyzing, comparing, questioning, and making choices. Learning about art helps young people form and verbalize ideas, thus fostering creative and critical thinking as well as language skills.

Post-It Activity (*suggested by Pam Stephens*)
Give each group a large study print or poster and a pad of sticky notes. Pin up the print so everyone in the group can see it. Ask students not to read any information on the back of the work. For this activity, only use the visual evidence in the work of art itself.

Each group should choose a recorder to write for the group and a reporter who will report to the class.

Ask students to brainstorm words, phrases, or sentences related to the work on view. Words can relate to subject matter, media, meaning, the elements of art, art history, or general critical observations. The recorder writes the words as they are generated on the sticky notes and attaches the notes around the edge of the reproduction.

When the groups finish brainstorming, each member of the group should write a paragraph about the work (2-3 sentences) using words or phrases generated by the group. Next, share statements within groups and then with the class.

In the following activities, students learn about the diverse nature of art as well as people's responses to art, and the difference between personal preference and judgment.

Stranded on a Deserted Island

In this activity, students imagine spending one year on a deserted island and select one work of art from the collection to accompany them on their lengthy stay. To begin, break the class into small groups and provide each group with 10-12 art prints that include a range of subject matter and styles. Introduce the activity by saying something like:

> "Imagine that you are exiled on a deserted island. You will have to stay on the island for one year. However, you are in luck! You may select one work of art to have with you for the length of your stay. Given this situation your task is to decide which work of art it will be. Take time now to scan the art prints on your table (or on display in the room) and select a work of art to take with you to the island. When you have made your selections, you will discuss your choices within your group and the criteria you used in making the selections." We will then share our selections with the class."

Follow-up questions when students are discussing their choices with the class include, "What qualities were you looking for in the work? Was it a difficult decision? Are there similarities in the works selected by your group as a whole? What works would you absolutely not take along? Why? Could you live for one year with a painting that you didn't like?"

School Art Collection

Imagine that a wealthy community member has given your school a considerable amount of money to purchase ten artworks to begin a permanent collection of art that will be displayed in the offices and classrooms of the school. You have been chosen to serve on a committee to select the works that will be purchased.

The task for your committee is to: (1) determine the criteria for selecting the works to be displayed; and (2) apply that criteria to a group of 20 works submitted by the artists for possible inclusion into the school's permanent collection.

- You must select 10 works (no more, no less).
- You must provide reasons for your choices.

During the follow-up discussion with the class, explore the similiaries and differences in choices between groups as well as the reasons given for the choices made.

World Art Fair

Imagine that next year there will be a World Art Fair in Paris. Each country in the world may enter one work of art that must, in some way, describe or convey what life is like in that country. The American entry, for example, must in some way illustrate or convey the meaning of life in the United States.

Your team will be given three works from which to select your entry. Once you have made your selection, you need to come up with an argument that will back up your choice. Remember that the work you select should somehow represent life in America.

When each team has made their selection, we will hold a class debate. Each team is responsible for supporting their selection and convincing the other teams that their selection is the best.

The object is to win votes from the other teams. When the debating is over, each of you will vote to determine which work of art will represent the U.S. in Paris.

Milkbone by David Bates, 1983.