

Contempo- rary Art

Investigators



A. Overview

This lesson is designed to help teachers and students alike learn how to look at, talk about, and enjoy contemporary art. Students will practice important critical-thinking skills as they investigate an artwork, making observations to support their interpretations of the artwork.

If you are coming to the Walker for a field trip, we recommend facilitating this lesson within a week or two of your visit.

B. Objectives

Students will...

- Define “art” and identify the different reasons that artists create artworks
- Go through the steps of interpreting an artwork by making observations and using those observations to form an argument about the artwork’s meaning.



HOW TO USE THIS LESSON

This is a lesson plan for the classroom. If you are bringing your students to the Walker, we highly recommend the Walker Art Center Field Trip Preparation Lesson as well.

The accompanying PowerPoint presentation includes simple instructions for this lesson in the presenter notes.

Teachers know their own classrooms best, so please adapt the activities to fit your students’ ages, needs, and interests.

LESSON MATERIALS

- PowerPoint presentation that accompanies this lesson
- Smart Board or projector with internet connection
- Additional materials for the hands-on activities at the end of this lesson as needed

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Standards Connected to this Lesson

Visual Arts Standards (2018)

- 5.0.2.3.1 Create art that communicates an idea using artistic foundations.
- 5.1.2.3.1 Identify and use symbols when creating art.
- 5.2.2.3.1 Create art that represents natural and constructed environments.

Visual Arts, Artistic Foundations Standards (2008)

- 0.1.1.5.1 Identify the elements of visual art including color, line, shape, texture, and space.

English Language Arts: Speaking, Viewing, Listening, and Media-Literacy Benchmarks

- 0.8.1.1 Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about kindergarten topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.
- 1.8.1.1 Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 1 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.
- 2.8.1.1 Participate in collaborative conversations with diverse partners about grade 2 topics and texts with peers and adults in small and larger groups.

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1

What Is Art? (5–10 minutes)

Ask students the following questions and discuss their answers for each:

- What is art? Try to come up with a definition as a class.
- What are some types of art that you have seen?
- Why do people like to make art?
- Why do people like to look at art?

There are lots and lots of different types of art, and artists have many different reasons for creating their artwork. No matter what type of artwork you are looking at, though, the steps for looking at art are always the same!

Explain to students that in order to really get to know an artwork, they need to make careful observations, just like a detective would. It's important to notice the big things and the small details in an artwork.

Ask everyone to put on their detective hats and pull out their imaginary magnifying glasses to help them as they practice investigating a work of art!

2

Investigating an Artwork (15–20 minutes)

Using an artwork from the Walker's collection, students will practice looking at an artwork together as a group.

Step 1: React

Move to [Slide 2](#). Explain that when we first see an artwork, it usually makes us feel or think something. Someone might think: "I like the way this looks!" or "This is boring" or "This is funny!" This is called having a REACTION. Everyone has a reaction when seeing an artwork for the first time. Now it's time to practice reacting!

- Explain to students that they will have five seconds to look at a painting.
- Move to [Slide 3](#) to show students the slide of three photographs, called *Untitled*, from Carrie Mae Weems's *The Kitchen Table Series*. Start a countdown from five. When you reach zero, go to [Slide 4](#).
- Ask students to share their first thoughts or feelings about the photographs.

Step 2: Look and Describe

Move to [Slide 5](#). To really get to know an artwork, we need to spend more time with it than just five seconds. Explain to students that now they will make careful observations about these photographs. Just like a detective, they need to look for clues that might help them to understand what this artwork is saying.

Let's practice looking and describing! Move to [Slide 6](#).

- Look at Carrie Mae Weems's *Untitled* again. Invite students to share what they are observing.
- If needed, provide students with guiding questions, like: What do you see happening here? What details do you notice?
- Call on students to share their observations, making connections between observations whenever possible.

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Step 3: Think

Move to [Slide 7](#). This is the stage where we try to answer the question: “What is happening in this artwork?” or “What is this artwork about?”

Students will need to use their observations (or clues) to explain their ideas. Teachers can also include some contextual information about an artwork at this stage to help students form better interpretations.

Practice thinking! Move to [Slide 8](#).

- Discuss the following questions with students: What is this artwork about? What is happening here?
- An example of a “Thinking” statement is: “These are photographs of a woman and her husband”
- Teachers should follow up when students make such statements, saying, for example, “That is an interesting thought! What makes you think that these people are married?”
- Be sure to ask students which of their observations support their ideas. It’s also important to paraphrase students’ points and make connections between their responses (for example: Sarah, you seem to agree with Miguel that these people are in a relationship).

Explain to students that following these steps, REACT, LOOK & DESCRIBE, and THINK, will help them enjoy any type of artwork that they see. If students are coming to the Walker for a field trip, they’ll get to show off their art investigation skills by looking at artworks in person!

3

More to Explore!

Continue to practice investigating artworks by reacting, looking, describing, and thinking! The following options represent different types and styles of contemporary art. Discuss as many of these as you would like with students. Just click on the artwork links for high-resolution images, or use Slides 9-11 on the presentation.

Information for Teachers



Slide 10 Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, *Spoonbridge and Cherry*, 1985–1988

Claes Oldenburg first became well-known as a practitioner of Pop art, a 1960s movement that saw many artists turning to advertising and consumer products for subject matter. By the early 1980s, he had begun to make monumental outdoor works with Coosje van Bruggen, his wife and artistic partner. *Spoonbridge and Cherry* is one of their most celebrated collaborations. It was the first work commissioned for the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, which opened in 1988.

The fountain-sculpture was inspired by a novelty item Oldenburg had collected in 1962, featuring a spoon resting on an “island” of plastic chocolate. From this, the artists envisioned a gigantic utensil as a fanciful bridge over a pond. In considering

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Part 3 (cont.)

Minnesota as a site, they compared the spoon's raised bowl to the prow of a Viking ship or a duck bobbing in a lake. Van Bruggen added the cherry, a personal symbol recalling happy moments in a childhood clouded by World War II. At more than 50 feet long, *Spoonbridge and Cherry* has delighted visitors ever since and is now a familiar and iconic symbol for the Twin Cities.

- [The Minneapolis Sculpture Garden page on the Walker Art Center website.](#)
- Walker Art Center, "Why Not A Fork?" video, in which Oldenburg and van Bruggen discuss the piece with children for a documentary on the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden. Filmed 1988; running time 00:34.
- Tad Simons, "The Cherry on Top," Mpls. St. Paul Magazine, August 31, 2013.



Slide 11 Joan Mitchell, *Posted*, 1977

When American artist Joan Mitchell moved to France in 1968, the French countryside became a source of inspiration. Her two-acre home and studio in Vétheuil, a town near Giverny—where Impressionist Claude Monet resided some 100 years prior—provided her with luxurious vistas of the natural world. Rather than painting from observation outdoors, however, Mitchell instead created "remembered landscapes," often painting at night in her studio using rich color and sweeping, emotive strokes. The title of *Posted* references a term used to designate a place of sanctuary, where hunting is forbidden and wildlife is protected.

More Resources on Joan Mitchell

- For an artist bio, see "[Joan Mitchell](#)," Joan Mitchell Foundation website.

- For images of other paintings by Joan Mitchell, see "[Mid-Career: 1968–1980](#)," Joan Mitchell Foundation website.



Slide 12 Kerry James Marshall, *Gulf Stream*, 2003

Kerry James Marshall draws from black history, folklore, and popular culture to challenge the underrepresentation of African American artists and subjects in art history. *Gulf Stream* belongs to a series of works in which Marshall reinterprets iconic works of art, in this case American realist Winslow Homer's 1899 painting *The Gulf Stream*. Homer's version—painted at the peak of racial segregation in America—depicts a black sailor adrift on a broken vessel in stormy, shark-infested waters. Marshall contrasts the menacing tenor of Homer's painting with a more contemporary scene of leisure: here, four figures listen to music as their sailboat glides over calm waters. In the foreground, a black pelican—a symbol of protection against turbulent waters—guards the crew from the pier, while storm clouds are held at bay on the horizon.

More Resources on Kerry James Marshall

- [Kerry James Marshall's page on Jack Shainman Gallery's website](#)
- "[Kerry James Marshall](#)," on Art21.org. This page includes videos of the artist, a bio, and images of many of his other works.



Additional Hands-on Activity Options

Activity 1

Inspired by the work of Claes Oldenburg and Coosje Van van Bruggen

(10–20 minutes)

Look at Slide 10, *Spoonbridge and Cherry* (Claes Oldenburg and Coosje Van van Bruggen), and briefly go through the investigation steps: react, look and describe, and think.

Ask students:

- How does this sculpture make you feel? Why?
- Why do you think the artists chose to make this sculpture so big?

Design Instructions:

- 1 Ask students to come up with a list of 3 three objects they see often.
- 2 Tell them to choose one of these objects to make into a sculpture and decide if they will make this object much bigger or much smaller. How does it change the object if it's super big? If it's tiny?
- 3 Where would they place this sculpture once it's completed? Would it make sense to put it in the sculpture garden? In a local park? At school?
- 4 Students should make a drawing showing their sculpture idea, including the place they would want to put display it.

Activity 2

Inspired by the work of Joan Mitchell

(10–15 minutes)

Students can create their own abstract landscape paintings just like Joan Mitchell's. To start, ask students to think about a place that makes them feel happy.

Then, using watercolor paints, crayons, or markers, students should choose four colors that remind them of their chosen place .

Provide students with a piece of paper. The thicker the paper, the better (watercolor paper is ideal).

Students should start with one color. Give them 60 seconds to make short lines on their paper, just like Joan Mitchell did in her painting.

They can make as many lines as they want in these 60 seconds. Then, after 60 seconds, they should switch to the next color. Give them another 60 seconds to make their lines with the new color. Continue until students have filled their papers with all four colors.

Option to do a gallery walk so that students can see their classmates' artwork.

Activity 3

Inspired by the work of Kerry James Marshall

(15–20 minutes)

Provide each student with a piece of paper and colored pencils. Ask them to draw themselves doing their favorite activity—maybe it's playing a game, or sailing like the people in Kerry James Marshall's painting. Give them 5 to 10 minutes to draw.

After students are finished with their drawings, students should partner up, and each partner should investigate their partner's drawings using the four steps of investigation. See if they can guess which activity their partner drew!

Give them a few minutes to discuss. You can also hold a gallery walk so that students can see each other's drawings!