

Focus & Frame

A process for thinking in creative and civically-relevant ways through art

Pick an artwork and look together using these following steps.



Observe: Silently notice



Share and Listen: Share what you notice and listen to others' observations



Put together the clues: What might be going on here, and what makes you say so?



Consider through a lens: a lens is a way to look at something differently. These questions can help reveal new and different ways of thinking with the artwork. Choose one lens (Interconnectedness, Investigation, Imagination, or Influence) and consider the listed questions.



Interconnectedness: How does this artwork connect to you? To your family? To your neighborhood? What do you see that is familiar to you or that you have seen before?



Investigation: What is a mystery that you see in this artwork? Who, besides the artist, do you think would have something interesting to add to our conversation, and why?



Imagination: What is something you could add, subtract, or change to make the story more fair, healthy, or beautiful for the creatures in this world? What similar ideas did you hear from your classmates? What surprising ideas did you hear?



Influence: Which person, creature or thing in this artwork do you think is powerful (or powerless)? What makes you say that? What power acts on that person/creature/thing?

Tips for Use

Notice deeply Allow plenty of time for students to share what they notice, and return to noticing if interpretations are narrow or disconnected with what is visible in the art. Explain to students that this is a special way to look, and that it may feel unusual because it needs practice.

Encourage many perspectives Before you get started, ensure that you do not have one specific interpretation or message you want to drive the students toward. Be excited by surprising responses and ask “what makes you say that” of all theories. It is very important that all possible interpretations are welcomed so long as they can be supported by evidence in the artwork and/or connections to their own experiences.

Notice & Name Look for moments along the way to point out how we see things through our own experience. For instance, you might say “you are looking at the outfits and they remind you of clothing you’ve seen on a television show and that is giving you a clue about the time period this might depict.” Relatedly, if students say something that is incongruent with the time or place of the artwork, you might say “for our point of view in this time and place, this looks like a cellphone. What if I told you that this artwork was made before those were invented?”

Extensions & Variations

- Revisit the same work of art multiple times, being sure to take time to observe and share each time. What do you/ the students notice the second (third, fourth, etc.) times that you didn’t see before?
- Make the “Lens” questions your own by following the organic flow of the conversation, choosing whichever question (or questions) fit the conversation.
- Alternately, decide in advance which lens you’d like to use. Explain to students that a lens is a special way to look, and that it may feel unusual because it needs practice. The important thing is to know what kind of thinking you want to spark and to use these questions as suggestions.
- Use the same process with something else – a picture from a newspaper or magazine, an object of wonder or even student work.
- See the Tips for Creative & Civic Capacities resources for more tips; find sample artworks from the Columbus Museum of Art in the appendix

How does this tool Cultivate Creative & Civic Capacities (C4)?

C4 involves slowing down and engaging both imaginative and critical thinking in the face of ambiguity. This routine supports students to build creatively- and civically relevant habits, such as slowing down, observing beyond initial impressions, listening, co-creating multiple interpretations and reasoning with evidence. Art can also be a way of considering C4 Interconnectedness. Artworks – including those very familiar to students, like fashion and music – reflect both the individual vision of the artist and the cultural and social influences of the artist’s context; so, too, does our response to art reflect by individuality and group membership.

Tips for Creative & Civic Capacities through art

When done well and regularly, discussing art can build key C4 capacities, such as reasoning with evidence; considering different perspectives, times and places; embracing ambiguity, wondering about possibilities, and more. Like all forms of teaching, inquiry with art improves with practice – both on the student side and on the teacher side.

Here are some suggestions to support C4 thinking with art:

General tips for observation-based thinking with art

- **Slow down and notice.** People are eager to say what they think. Before they develop or share interpretations, have students share many observations. You might try directing students to
 - Set a timer and have everyone look in silence for 2 full minutes.
 - Zoom their attention in on one quadrant at a time.
 - List 5 things they see, and then 5 more.
 - Go in a circle having each person name just one thing they notice.
 - Look for something they think no one else has seen.
- **Back up interpretations** When students say things like “this is about...” or “the story is...” ask them **what they see that makes them say that**. When inviting interpretation, you can
 - Mirror back what students say.
 - Use your mirroring to draw students’ attention to their thinking, noting the moments when they might be relying on past experiences rather than just what they see. *Ex: “They’re in a church (what makes you say that?) because it has crosses and pews like a church” you could say “You recognize things in this scene that remind you of certain kinds of churches that you’ve seen before, maybe in person or in movies.”*
- **Return to noticing** if interpretations seem disconnected from what is apparent in the work.
- **Complexify interpretations** “Who can think of a different story that might be going on?” is a helpful way to nudge students to consider multiple interpretations.

Advice for selecting an artwork:

- **Try the tools with art of any subject matter.** Many C4-supportive thinking capacities can be built by using these steps with an artwork that does not overtly address a social issue. Particularly if you or your students are new to discussing art and/or civic issues, it can be helpful to start with art that is colorful, joyful or otherwise engaging to your particular group of learners.
- **Look to other times and places.** It may be easier to discuss a charged theme using a work from a different time or place which raises the same big idea.
- **“Play the movie.”** When selecting art, try to envision what your students might notice and interpret. Select a work you think contains enough ambiguity that students are likely to draw different interpretations of the same scene.
- **Remember that artists have their own frames.** Artists are people, like viewers. And, like us, artists are both unique individuals and part of the societies in which they lived. Remind students that artist intent is only one piece of what we can think about with art, and that artists have biases like anyone. Encourage students to complexify and/or challenge the messages they think the artwork presents.

- **Select works from, and of, a range of cultures and identities.** To present students with a more thorough view of human creativity, you will have to look beyond the best-known names. This is because the history of art training, display, and preservation has made it harder for women artists, artists of color, and artists outside of the global West to achieve notoriety.
- **For recommended sample artworks from the collection of the Columbus Museum of Art, see the Image Bank for Cultivating Creative & Civic Capacities.**

Prepare for the Unexpected

- **Try to imagine non-factual interpretations.** Decide in advance whether your priority is to foster wild imagination (including ideas out of sync with what the artist intended or belonging to a different time or place) or analysis using visual details and outside information to arrive at an interpretation that fits with what historians would say about the artwork. Either way, prepare to ask “what makes you say that,” and affirm what is valuable about students’ ideas (e.g. “you see this shape and it reminds you of your phone”). If it makes sense to, pivot with phrases like
 - “Is there anything else we see that doesn’t fit with that?”
 - “What if I told you (e.g. this was painted long before that was invented)?”
- **Know that you can hit “pause” if needed.** If students are getting heated in sharing their opinions, are sharing opinions that might be unintentionally harmful to others or seem totally lost, it is okay to ‘pause’ the conversation. You could say something like
 - “Let’s pause this conversation for now...after we do a bit more research, we can come back to it.”
- **Listen for, and challenge, stereotypes and bias.** Try to name the bias you think is shaping the comment and highlight the fact that social messaging (as well as personal experience) influences our interpretations. Use language that avoids shame, such as “it sounds like this work is reminding you of the negative and untrue stereotype that...”
- **Revisit conversations.** If there is something that excites student imagination, revisit it as a creative prompt. If there was something that didn’t sit right with you or others, devise a way to revisit that moment for a healing or complexifying conversation.

Image Bank for Cultivating Creative & Civic Capacities

How to use this resource:

This resource presents works of art from the collection of the Columbus Museum of Art.

These works have been selected by CMA educators for their adaptability to a wide range developmental levels and prior experience discussing art and/or civic topics. These images are especially appropriate for teachers with no extra training in teaching with artworks.

Use these works as springboards for discussion by beginning with observation, discussing many possibilities, and reasoning with evidence. Emphasize that there are no wrong answers, but that students should back up their claims.

For ideas on how to have conversations with and through art, see the *Focus & Frame* tool from Cultivating Creative & Civic Capacities.

These works may be used for educational purposes only. For any usage outside of your teaching practice, see the last page for conditions of publication.

Information key:

Alongside the artwork is some identifying information about the artwork. It is your choice whether and how you might share this information with students.

Here is the meaning of that information



Rockwell Kent,
Mad and Bird, c. 1918
Oil on Glass
Gift of Ferdinand Howald
1931.188

- Artist's Name
- *Title of the Artwork*, year of creation
- Medium (materials that the artwork is made of)
- Information about how the object entered the museum collection
- Accession number (unique identification number used by the museum for tracking and organization)



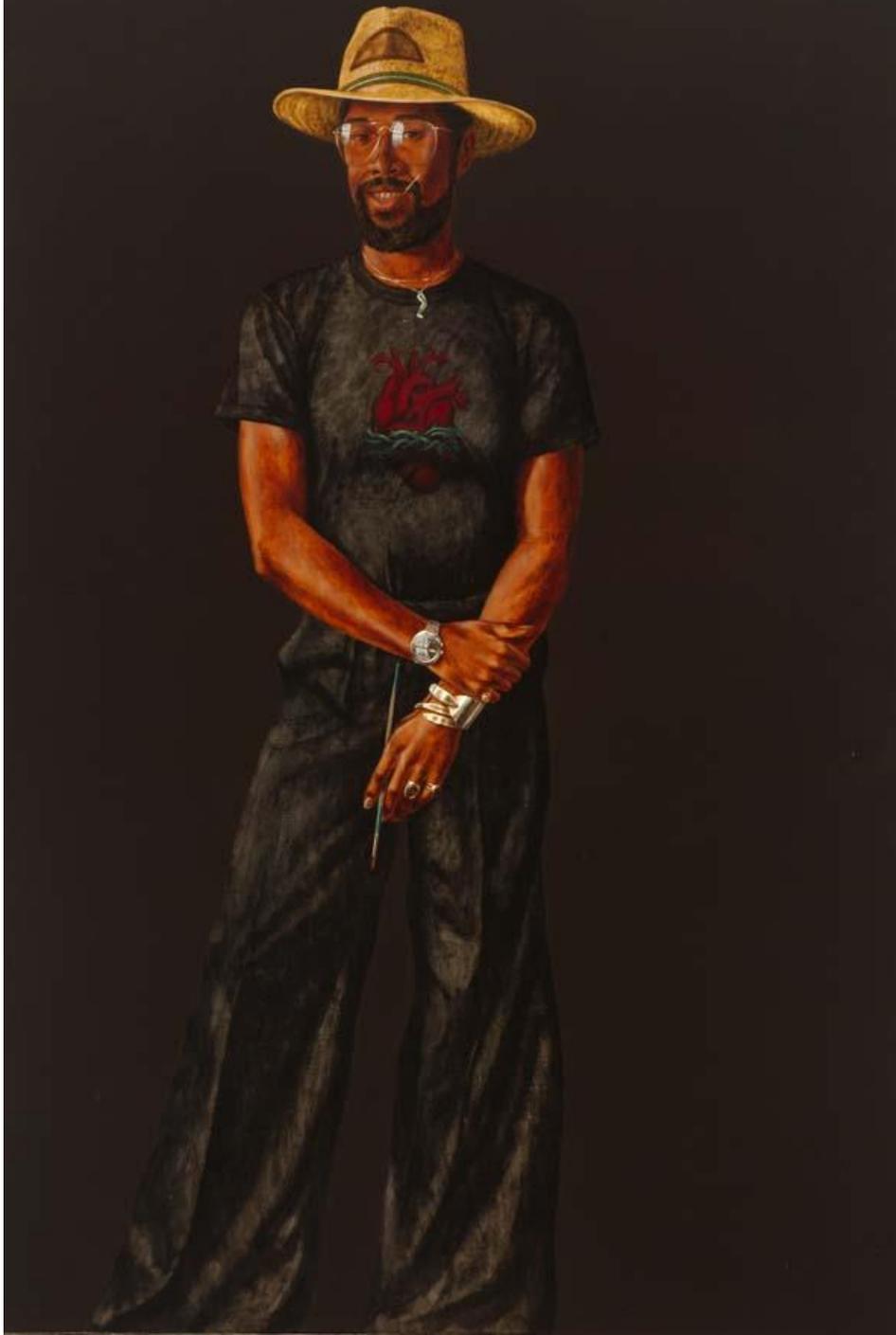
Francesca Woodman
McDowell Colony 1979-1980
Gelatin silver print
Gift of Charlotte Hawke,
Denver
2005.009.002



George Tooker
Cornice, c. 1949
Tempera on panel
Museum Purchase, Howald
Fund II
1980.026



Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson,
*To Be a Drum [Daddy Wes, Mat,
and Martha Lying in the Grass]*,
1998
Gift of the Artist
2002.016.002n



Barkley Hendricks
Doc and Ruby's Oldest Boy, 1979
Acrylic on canvas
72 x 48 in. (182.88 x 121.92 cm)
Museum Purchase, Derby Fund, from the Philip J. and
Suzanne Schiller Collection of American Social Commentary
Art, 1930–1970
2005.012.028



Thomas Hart Benton
Strike 1933
Lithograph
Museum Purchase, Derby
Fund, from the Philip J. and
Suzanne Schiller Collection of
American Social Commentary
Art, 1930-1970
2005.013.035



Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson

Sidewalks of Poindexter Village: Market Street, 1999

Paint on muslin

Estate of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, Columbus Museum
of Art, Ohio, Courtesy of Hammond Harkins Galleries

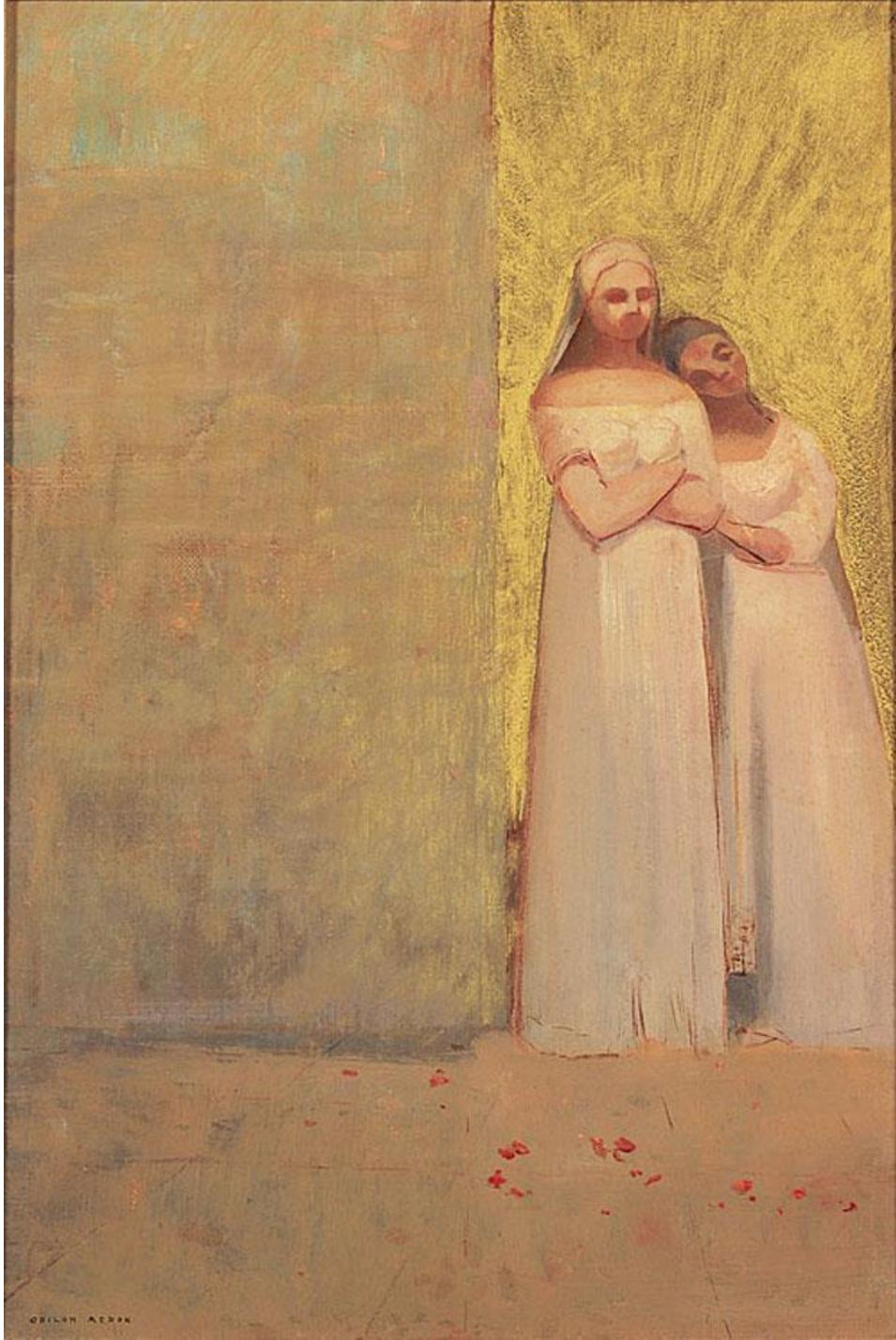
T Aminah.2016.020



Romare Howard Bearden
La Primavera 1967
Collage and painting on
board
Museum Purchase, Derby
Fund, from the Philip J. and
Suzanne Schiller Collection of
American Social Commentary
Art, 1930-1970
2005.012.007



Gustave Courbet
Marine, c. 1860
Oil on canvas
Gift of Ferdinand Howald
1931.049



Odilon Redon
The Two Graces, c. 1900
Oil on canvas
Gift of Howard D. and Babette L.
Sirak, the Donors to the Campaign
for Enduring Excellence, and the
Derby Fund
1991.001.054



Rockwell Kent,
Maid and Bird, c. 1918
Oil on Glass
Gift of Ferdinand Howald
1931.188



Clarence Holbrook Carter
*Jane Reed and Dora
Hunt*, 1941
Oil on canvas
Museum Purchase, Derby
Fund
2014.023



Barbara Watler
A Long Way Home 2009
Fabric, prefabricated plastic
dolls, and recycled metal keys
Gift of the Artist
2009.038



Benny Andrews

The Watchers, 1969

Museum Purchase, Derby Fund, from the Philip J.
and Suzanne Schiller Collection of American Social
Commentary Art, 1930–1970

2005.012.005



Baseera Khan
*I Arrive in a Place with a High Level of
Psychic Distress (Pink)*, 2021
Framed C-prints, laser-cut acrylic, and
maple wood spacers
Museum Purchase with funds provided by
The Contemporaries
2021.015



Marion Post Wolcott
*Men and Women Fishing in Creek
near Cotton Plantations outside
Belzoni, Miss Delta*
October 1939
Dye transfer print
Gift of Martin and Lynn Halbfinger
2016.019.021



Ronald Trujillo
Shelter, 1989
Color etching
Gift of Aminah Robinson in
memory of Robert
Hamilton Blackburn, 1920-
2003
2003.028.012

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