What Is Art?

Art is created for many reasons.

Artists create works of art to:
- Make us feel an emotion;
- Tell a story;
- Make a point; or
- Awaken our senses.

Art includes paintings, photographs, sculpture, movies, plays, music, dance, fashion, books, poetry and design.

Talk about art you have seen in these different categories.

What kinds of art do you and your family enjoy?

What kinds would you like to discover or learn more about?
Take a Look at Visual Arts

Visual artists make many, many choices. Some might include: What should be shown? Should it look realistic or not? Should it be real or imagined? What colors, shapes and textures should be used?

Though these two sculptures are from different artists from different cultures and eras, they seem to show the same thing: a person deep in thought.

Have a Second ‘Thought’
The Rodin sculpture called “Thought” may look unfinished, but it is exactly as Rodin wanted it to be. Take a look at it online. How does it compare to “The Thinker”? What feelings does each work inspire? What does each seem to say about thinking?

See Movie Posters as Art
Movie posters are another kind of art. Click on the two links below to see different posters for two different movie versions of William Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet.” This story is about a young couple who fall deeply in love despite their families’ hatred for each other. They get married, but fate keeps them from having a “happily ever after.”

Based on the posters, how do you think the movies are different from each other? Why? What clues or details do you see in each poster that hint at what each movie is like?

See How Music Connects to Art
How does the music from the two versions of “Romeo and Juliet” reflect the different approaches of the movies?

Listen to some music from “Romeo and Juliet”
Listen to some music from “Romeo + Juliet”
Meet a Mysterious Girl

“Starry Night” is not meant to be a realistic depiction of a night sky, but Johannes Vermeer’s “Girl with a Pearl Earring” seems very real.

You can visit the website of the Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis in the Netherlands to view this painting.

What parts of the painting are your eyes drawn to? What do you think her expression means?

Part of the painting’s appeal is that the young woman doesn’t seem to be posing at all — she’s looking over her shoulder as if she’s about to ask us a question, or answer one of ours.

And she is one of art’s enduring mysteries. No one knows who she is and why she is dressed so exotically.

See Feelings in the Abstract

Joan Miro’s “Bleu II” is an abstract painting. That means it doesn’t represent a real-life object, but may be based on a feeling or a concept.

Some people find abstract art frustrating, saying they “don’t get it.” But there’s usually no great mystery — the artist carefully assembles and arranges color, shapes, shadings and lines to create an interesting and emotionally evocative piece of art.

As a class, use your Internet search skills to find an image of this painting online.

Does this painting seem still or moving? Do different parts stand still while others move?

What types of real-life objects do the black shapes remind you of?

Do the red and black shapes seem informal and relaxed or formal and rigid?

If this were a real place, would you want to visit it?

If you were to hang it the wrong way with the red line horizontal, how would that change what you think about the painting? Would it seem to mean something different?

How Did Van Gogh Feel About His Life?

Click on this link to the Van Gogh Gallery and see a video about Van Gogh’s life in his own words. How were Van Gogh’s feelings about life expressed in his paintings?

Why do you think he felt as he did about religion late in life?
Meet an Odd Boating Party

Pierre Auguste Renoir’s “Luncheon of the Boating Party (Le Déjeuner des Canotiers)” tells a story that doesn’t quite connect. Study it for a moment.

- What sort of day are the boaters having?
- Is it a warm day or a cold day?
- Are these people formal or informal with each other?
- What is the mood of the painting?

Now, look at the man with his back to us in the center of the picture. At whom does he appear to be looking? At whom is his companion looking?

Continue following the path of looks of the people in the picture. Where does this path end up?

Only two characters are actually looking at each other. Who are they?

Big City Life

Edward Hopper’s “Nighthawks” is one of America’s favorite paintings. Visit the website of the Art Institute of Chicago to view this artwork.

Many artists choose to highlight the glamour or chaos of the big city. Hopper shows the loneliness of urban life.

A “nighthawk” is another term for a “night owl,” a person who tends to stay up late.

How does Hopper separate the characters from each other?
How does he separate them from us?
Is there any evidence of the natural world in the picture?
Is there anything to suggest softness?
Are there any rounded lines?
Is there any movement?

What do you think the people in the picture are each thinking about?

Hear Diner Lovers Talk About ‘Nighthawks’

The way other people react to a work of art can help us sort out our own feelings. Click on this link to listen to radio journalist Scott Simon talk to diner patrons about “Nighthawks.”

What are the opinions of the people in the interviews?
Do their opinions change how you feel about “Nighthawks”?

See Other Hopper Works

Edward Hopper did not just paint city scenes. Do these other topics surprise you after seeing “Nighthawks”?
Jacob Lawrence was an African-American artist who became famous for the way he portrayed the lives of black Americans. He described his work as “reality rather than realism” and in “The Photographer” he shows a busy street scene and a glimpse of a changing world.

**Study an Artist’s Self-Image**

It’s thought that Artemisia Gentileschi used two angled mirrors, like those in a dressing room, to paint “Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting” during the 1630s. Visit the website of Great Britain’s Royal Collection to view this artwork. How does this artist present herself? What hints does she give you about her personality?

**Explore Another Artist’s Self-Image**

Mary Cassatt also painted self-portraits. Visit the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art again to view it. How is this self-portrait different from the approach of Artemisia Gentileschi?

**Draw Your Self-Portrait**

Take a few minutes to think about how you would present yourself if you were going to paint a self-portrait. Or look at a favorite photo of yourself. Then think like an artist and draw a self-portrait that will highlight qualities that you think are most important about you. How will you show those qualities in a portrait? What colors will you use? What features of your face would you emphasize? Why?

**Experience a Musical Slide Show**

Jacob Lawrence’s Migration Series tells the story of how and why 2 million African-Americans moved from the South to the North in the early part of the 20th century in the Great Migration.

Watch and listen to this musical slide show. Which of the pictures has the strongest emotional punch for you? Which make you think the most? Which tell you something you didn’t know about African-Americans who took part in the Great Migration?
Pablo Picasso’s “Guernica” is a masterpiece from 1937.
Consider that the painting is 11 feet tall and almost 26 feet wide. What effect would the size have on a viewer?

Three of the characters appear to be screaming up at the sky. Why is each one in pain?

It’s hard to tell where one figure ends and one begins. Why would Picasso create that confusion?

Now, learn about the story from PBS’ Treasures of the World website: “On April 27th, 1937, unprecedented atrocities are perpetrated on behalf of (Generalissimo Francisco) Franco against the civilian population of a little Basque village in northern Spain. Chosen for bombing practice by Hitler’s burgeoning war machine, the hamlet is pounded with high-explosive and incendiary bombs for over three hours. Townspeople are cut down as they run from the crumbling buildings. Guernica burns for three days. Sixteen-hundred civilians are killed or wounded.”

Read the original eyewitness news report of the attack from The Times of London.

Over time, “Guernica” has become an anti-war symbol. A huge tapestry version of the painting was displayed at the United Nations in New York.

Examine an American Hero
“Washington Crossing the Delaware” by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze from 1851 presents another side of war. Like “Guernica,” this famous painting is also huge: 12 feet high and 21 feet long.

Study the painting online as a class.

Now, a little background: The painting pictures George Washington on his way to a surprise attack on the British and Hessians during the Revolutionary War. It was the day after Christmas, 1776, and the waters were treacherous. The artist wasn’t an eyewitness to events, so his choices are a deliberate way of getting his point across.

Given where the light is placed, at whom are we meant to look?

Look at each of the rowers. How do they appear? How are they dressed? What is the artist saying?

Look at Washington. What do you think we are supposed to feel about him? Why?

Compare George Washington Portraits
George Washington is one of the most frequently painted figures in American history. Compare portraits of George Washington in this Smithsonian Institution exhibit. Do most artists take the same approach? Why do you think that is the case? What kind of person does Washington appear to be in the portraits?
Leonardo da Vinci (VIN-chee), 1452-1519, is probably the most famous painter in history. You likely are already familiar with his paintings “Mona Lisa” and “The Last Supper.”

But what you may not know is that Leonardo da Vinci was a scientist and inventor who made discoveries in anatomy, zoology, optics, geology, botany, aerodynamics and hydrodynamics.

His scientific experiments made his art more realistic, and his artistic eye allowed him to see details and imagine concepts that scientists might miss.

Today, we have anatomy books and photographs to show us what we look like under the skin. But painters (and doctors!) during da Vinci’s day didn’t have that option because the powerful Roman Catholic Church had banned the dissection of human bodies. No one was allowed to cut open a dead person to see what was inside.

Leonardo da Vinci’s early anatomical drawings reflect traditional (and often wrong) notions about the body at the time he lived.

Later, he was able to make extensive studies of actual dissected human corpses (he apparently was given permission by a few hospitals though the church ban was still in place). He drew exactly what he saw, even when it contradicted previous traditional assumptions. His drawings were highly detailed and remained the most precise anatomical drawings for hundreds of years. And they were beautiful, too.

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**See Three-Dimensional Objects**

One way of making a painting look realistic is to create a sense of depth, making the objects appear as if they were three-dimensional, rather than flat.

Leonardo da Vinci did that when he painted “The Last Supper.” What is the effect of seeing the landscape outside the window?

**Learn About Linear Perspective**

Leonardo da Vinci made things seem three-dimensional with a technique called “linear perspective.” Learn about it online in this video.

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**View Leonardo da Vinci’s Scientific Drawings**

Study Leonardo da Vinci’s scientific drawings by visiting this site online.

Why were they useful to scientists in his day?

What do they teach us today about science and scientific inquiry?

How are they effective as works of art?

How do they draw your eye to key details?
Art isn’t just found in museums. Art can be found in (and on) many public buildings and spaces, such as parks, plazas, libraries and government buildings. Like all art, public statues, murals, memorials, art installations and architecture are subject to criticism and study as people decide whether or not they like them. Visual art is like food — it’s entirely possible to dislike a certain piece of “good” art.

Vietnam Memorial

When the Vietnam Veterans Memorial opened on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in 1982, it was not popular with everyone. In fact, some people disliked it a great deal.

It is a simple, V-shaped wall of black granite built into the earth. It bears the names of the 58,000 Americans who were killed or went missing in the war. As you walk along it, the wall of names grows taller and taller, and you can see yourself reflected in the black stone as you read. As you walk along the second leg of the “V,” the wall gets smaller and smaller and you find yourself back on the Mall, headed to a massive white monument (either the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Memorial).

Some veterans and civilians felt that the memorial didn’t properly honor the sacrifices of those who had served. It was too dark, stark, ominous, they said, and unlike its classical neighbors on the Mall.

But soon, the simple emotional beauty of this piece of public art made it more visited than any of its neighbors. Its form reflects the nature of the war itself — starting small, growing huge and then winding down.

People still leave flowers, letters and personal mementos there to pay their respects to those who served.

Learn About the Struggle to Build It

Now read about the struggle to get the Vietnam Veterans Memorial built in the words of those who commissioned it, designed it and opposed it.

Think About the Sept. 11 Memorial

Maya Lin, who designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, was on the selection panel for the national 9/11 Memorial being built in New York City. Look at the details of the designs online.

What do you think they symbolize? What emotions do you think people will feel when they visit the memorial? Why?

Read a Review of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial from 1981

This review and commentary about the Vietnam Veterans Memorial appeared in the Nov. 9, 1981 issue of Time magazine.

How does the writer feel about the memorial, and why?

How do you feel about the memorial? Do you think your feelings would have been different if you had written about them at the time the memorial was built?