

# Learning to Look: Using Artworks to Heighten Observation Skills

## *Birds in Art 2009*

### Pre-Visit Education Materials

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#### Objective

Expand students' use of observation and critical-thinking skills when looking at art.

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#### Introduction for Class

On average, museum visitors spend less than even one minute in front of an artwork and much of that time is spent reading or considering label information.

What does one minute “feel” like? Let's sit quietly for one minute. (Use a clock to keep time.)

Ask students if one minute is enough time to look at an artwork.

Studying an artwork for a longer period of time allows us to see additional details that we might not otherwise have noticed. More time also allows us to think critically about the artwork, the artist, and the potential meaning of the piece.

Now we'll try a game designed to illustrate how we look at artworks.

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#### Activity

Take students into a computer lab or use a classroom projector with internet capabilities; select one of the following URLs.

*Note: These are high-resolution images that could take a little longer to upload.*

## *Birds in Art Artwork Gallery*

1.

[www.lywam.org/media/busbycranegathering.jpg](http://www.lywam.org/media/busbycranegathering.jpg)

John Busby, *Crane Gathering*, 2001, oil on canvas

2.

[www.lywam.org/media/petemarshall.jpg](http://www.lywam.org/media/petemarshall.jpg)

Pete Marshall, *Magpie Menace*, 2009, oil on canvas

3.

[www.lywam.org/media/kevinsloan.jpg](http://www.lywam.org/media/kevinsloan.jpg)

Kevin Sloan, *Birds of America: Whooping Crane*, 2008, acrylic on canvas

4.

[www.lywam.org/media/jeremypaul.jpg](http://www.lywam.org/media/jeremypaul.jpg)

Jeremy Paul, *Reflections in a Green Jar*, 2008, acrylic on hardboard

5.

[www.lywam.org/media/colejohnson.jpg](http://www.lywam.org/media/colejohnson.jpg)

Cole Johnson, *Flight of the Hummingbird*, 2008, graphite on board

6.

[www.lywam.org/media/dianemason.jpg](http://www.lywam.org/media/dianemason.jpg)

Diane D. Mason, *Who's Looking at Who?*, 2008, bronze

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Project each image and instruct students that they'll have 90 seconds to look at each artwork and compile visual information. Students may take notes on a blank sheet of paper.

Encourage students to look up, down, left and right.

Suggest that students consider the following questions/prompts:

- What is the artwork made of?
- What are the subjects of the artwork?
- Where is the setting of the artwork?
- What time of year does the scene take place?
- What is the mood or feeling of the artwork?
- How many different colors do you see in the artwork?
- Why do you think the artist made the artwork?

After each 90-second period, invite students to share their observations with the class. Keep track of all responses on the board. When students provide their observations, ask them why or how they came to their conclusion. Having students articulate their reactions out loud is key to honing their observation skills.

Review the responses as a class; offer students an opportunity to add additional observations.

Repeat this process with each artwork. This “game” helps improve students’ observation skills while also emphasizing the importance of delayed recall relative to each artwork and artist.

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Teachers: below you'll find additional information about each artist and artwork; share with students as appropriate.

### 1. John Busby

- Born in England; lives and works in Scotland
- Working as an artist for more than 60 years
- Interested in working directly from life, i.e., prefers to draw, sketch, and paint outdoors while observing birds

### 2. Pete Marshall

- Born in England; lives and works in Australia as a veterinarian
- Female
- This particular bird (Australian magpie) was rescued after a wildfire. It had mildly burnt feet and a damaged wing, which healed quickly thanks to Pete's help. While Pete carried it to its release site, she was struck by the clarity and depth of color of the iris.

### 3. Kevin Sloan

- American
- Kevin sees this artwork as a collaboration between himself and John James Audubon. Audubon created images of American birds and wildlife never seen before. Kevin's artwork mimics Audubon's style, but working more than 150 years after Audubon, he depicts birds facing environmental threats and possible extinction (consider the symbolism of thunderstorm in the background).

### 4. Jeremy Paul

- English
- Jeremy concentrated on the layers of reflected light in *Reflections in a Green Jar*. Study the green jar and its multiple reflections. Is the effect similar to two mirrors directly across from each other?

### 5. Cole Johnson

- American

- Cole attempted to convey the essence of hummingbird flight by representing multiple poses/studies of a hummingbird.
- Cole works in graphite, which is an artist's pencil.

#### 6. Diane D. Mason

- American
- This artwork is a reminder that we don't need binoculars, a camera, or a bird identification guide (binoculars and a bird identification guide are represented in the sculpture) to enjoy those special moments when we encounter wildlife, such as this burrowing owl.
- Also, the title of this artwork is a play on words that mimics an owl's call, *Who's Looking at Who?*.

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### Assignment

Based on all the visual information compiled from the students' observations, ask each student to select a favorite artwork.

Each student should then develop a creative response to the artwork. This creative response should include both a written component and an artistic component.

#### Written Component Suggestions

- Paragraph outlining the process of looking at the artwork
- Compare and contrast paragraph, perhaps comparing another student's observations to his or her own
- Story based on the observations made about the artwork
- A bird soliloquy
- Paragraph in the artist's voice

#### Artistic Component Suggestions

- Poem inspired by the artwork and read for the class
  - A dance inspired by the artwork and performed for the class
  - Piece of music inspired by the artwork and performed for the class
  - An artwork inspired by the artwork and displayed in the classroom
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## During Your Museum Visit

### Note to Teachers:

Museum docents will ask students to do a similar activity in the galleries.

### Note to Students:

If during your visit you see an artwork discussed in class, please alert your docent!