

Teaching Guide



Practicing Democracy: 150 Years of St. Olaf Student Civic Engagement
September 13 – December 10, 2024
Flaten Art Museum, St. Olaf College



About the Flaten Art Museum

Flaten Art Museum advances excellence in the liberal arts through exploration of values and vocation, inclusive programming, and global engagement – hallmarks of a St. Olaf College education. It engages campus, local, and worldwide audiences in creative and critical thinking through encounters with art that the museum collects, interprets, exhibits, publishes, and preserves.

Why Teach with Art?

Object-based learning fosters critical thinking, creative expression, writing, public speaking, and the understanding of alternative perspectives through group discussion and visual literacy. The Flaten Art Museum works with faculty across academic disciplines to customize class visits and design assignments that align with course objectives. Museum staff make object-based learning approachable and enriching with a learner-centered method of talking about art called Visual Thinking Strategy (VTS).

Student engagement can happen during a single class period or a sequence or related visits. Resulting projects may include conversation in a foreign language, creative writing, research papers, soundscapes, dance, musical performance, drawings, personal reflections, exhibition labels, blog posts, and more. If you are interested in teaching with the Flaten Art Museum, please email museum director Jane Becker Nelson at beckerj@stolaf.edu.

About the Exhibition

As St. Olaf College marks its 150th anniversary and the U.S. embarks on the 2024 election season, *Practicing Democracy* honors the college's rich history of civic engagement and equips a new generation with tools to strengthen civil society. For 150 years St. Olaf students have organized nonviolent protests, fought to expand voting rights, hosted thought leaders and political candidates, and found creative ways to highlight urgent issues. In the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election, St. Olaf College made history with the highest student voting rate of all colleges and universities in the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, a nonpartisan effort to boost students' civic engagement. How will Oles show up to shape the future?

The west gallery offers a window into the college's past. Photographs and ephemera from College Archives reveal that students have always been at the forefront of political action. The east gallery features a mock vote aimed to familiarize first-time voters with the election process. Following the election on Tuesday, November 5, the gallery transforms into a "living room" for reflection and community-building. The Flaten Art Museum, Academic Civic Engagement within the Smith Center for Global Engagement, and Institute for Freedom and Community present this non-partisan exhibition to expand voting access and foster civic engagement.

Thanks to student curatorial assistants Omar Al-Taie '24, Anika James '25, Andrew Mazariegos '24, Emma Rezac '25, Lauren Schilling '25, Sophie Smith '25, and Roxi Wessel '26. Special thanks to St. Olaf College Archives, Carleton College's Perlman Teaching Museum, and Carleton College Archives for their generous loans.

Please note: The museum will be closed for St. Olaf's Fall Break October 12-15, and Thanksgiving Break November 27-December 1.

Programming

Friday, September 13, 2024

Opening Reception, 5-7 p.m. | Remarks 5:30 p.m.

Grab a slice of Pause Pizza and join the exhibition's curators for a celebratory election season kick-off and opening reception. Free and open to the public.

Tuesday, September 17

Register to Vote at FAM, 3-5 p.m.

In conjunction with National Voter Registration Day and Constitution Day, St. Olaf's Election Ambassadors will hold "office hours" in the east gallery, registering voters and answering questions about the election process.

Saturday, October 5

March, Speak, Dance, Draw, Vote! Civic Engagement Alumni Roundtable, 4 p.m.

Welcome back to the Hill, Oles! In conjunction with St. Olaf Homecoming Weekend, alumni who have made notable contributions to civic engagement will converse about the many forms of student activism, past and present.

Thursday, October 24

[Sunshine Hillygus](#): Mobilizing Young Voters in a Polarized Political Environment, 4 p.m.

Viking Theater, Buntrock Commons

Join Hillygus for a reception at the Flaten Art Museum immediately following the talk.

Tuesday, November 5

Election Day!

Thursday, November 7, 7-8 p.m.

Post-Election Living Room Conversation with Chris Chapp, Professor of Political Science;

Morrison Family Director of the Institute for Freedom and Community

Cozy in and debrief the election results in a casual Q & A setting.

Group Visits

Flaten Art Museum's rotating exhibitions offer multiple entry points for teaching, learning and enrichment. Guided tours and self-led visits are available for classes and groups.

→ [Request an exhibition visit](#)

Questions for Looking

Looking Back: Archives

The west (left) gallery offers a window into the college's past. Photographs and ephemera from College Archives reveal that students have always been at the forefront of political action.

Consider: Curatorial Choices

This exhibition offers a wide array of examples showcasing St. Olaf students' involvement in civic engagement. However, it is important to note that this is not an exhaustive representation of all student engagement at St. Olaf. The St. Olaf Archives hold thousands of folders and files documenting the school's history; what you see here is just a glimpse of the broader narrative and reality. The process of curating naturally involves selection, and even the most comprehensive archives will never capture every aspect of the past. Whose stories are untold? Why? Why is it impossible for archives to hold records of everything?

Why do you think the curators chose the objects you see in front of you as worth displaying in *Practicing Democracy*?

- Are there particular themes or narratives that stick out to you throughout the exhibit? How do these selections shape the story being told about St. Olaf student engagement?

Choose a particular photograph or piece of ephemera. Why (or why not) is that object important for visitors to encounter in 2024?

- Does this artifact offer a unique perspective on the past? What new information does it reveal about St. Olaf, the student experience, and civic engagement?

Consider: Archival Gaps & Silences

What do you imagine the term "Archival Silence" signifies? What does an archival silence look like?

Read the following definition of archival silences and reflect on the questions below. "Gaps or missing pieces in the historical record, often caused by those who were unable to write their own records, or whose records were not considered valuable or were suppressed by the dominant culture. Should be distinguished from merely lack of holdings in a particular repository. Sometimes also referred to as 'archival silences.'" (Source: [Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy](#), Developed by the SAA-ACRL/RBMS)

Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy
(JTF-PSL))

1. How do the gaps and silences in the St. Olaf Archives affect our understanding of the history of civic engagement at St. Olaf?
2. How can we work to ensure more voices are included in our historical records moving forward?
3. If you could contribute one object to the St. Olaf Archives to represent this moment in St. Olaf student life, what would it be?

Consider: Leading (and Following) by Example

Choose an example of student activism in the exhibit that resonates with you.

1. What about the student(s) action draws your attention years later?
2. Are there any examples of student engagement in the exhibition that you would critique? Which ones, and why?
3. In your perspective, what makes activism effective? Are there barriers to achieving this – what are they?

Activity: Class Archive Drive

This exhibition is possible thanks to Oles who collected and contributed photos and ephemera. Remember – they didn't have mobile devices to store everything digitally! The St. Olaf archivists are always seeking donations from current students. In an age where so much of our lives are captured digitally, it's easy to forget that these memories may not be preserved for future generations. We are living history. Future generations will be interested in understanding our time. Consider organizing an archive drive with your class. It could be themed around materials created throughout your class, focused on the 2024 election, or centered around something else entirely!

The St. Olaf Archives has specific guidelines for collections and donations, please follow the process [outlined on their website](#) to organize an archive drive.

Looking Forward: Mock Election Engagement

The east (right) gallery features a mock vote aimed to familiarize first-time voters with the U.S. election process. Following the election on Tuesday, November 5, the gallery transforms into a “living room” for reflection and community-building.

Consider: Impact & Relevance for Students

1. What barriers to voting does a mock election help dismantle?
 - a. *Possible responses: A mock election can help reduce the fear or confusion that comes with voting for the first time. It familiarizes participants with the mechanics of voting—such as how to use a voting machine, fill out a ballot, and navigate polling place processes. It can reduce anxiety about and clarify the process for those who might feel intimidated or unsure about what to expect.*
2. How can a mock election help prepare young people who may not be eligible to vote?
 - a. *Possible responses: A mock election helps young people understand the significance of voting and prepares them if and when they are eligible. It empowers young people to start thinking critically about issues and their future role in the democratic process, making them more likely to vote when they become eligible. This early exposure fosters a sense of responsibility and civic awareness. Studies world wide have shown that participation in mock elections, especially through student’s schools, increases voter turnout when they are eligible to vote.*
3. I am an international student – why should I participate in the mock election at FAM?
 - a. *Possible responses: Participating in a mock election allows international students to learn about the democratic process in the U.S., which can deepen their understanding of American culture and politics. It also provides an opportunity to have meaningful discussions with peers by contributing a global perspective on civic responsibility, even if they can’t vote in the United States elections.*
4. A mock election doesn’t have any weight on actual politics – why is it important for civic engagement?
 - a. *Possible responses: While a mock election doesn’t impact real-world outcomes, it plays a crucial role in fostering a culture of participation. It encourages people to think critically about issues, engage in political discussions, and understand the impact of voting. This type of practice can lead to greater turnout and more informed voting in actual elections.*
5. I’m not voting/not voting in MN.

- a. *Even if you're not voting in the current election or voting in another state, participating in a mock election helps you stay informed and engaged with the political process. It reinforces the habit of voting and ensures that you're prepared when you do have the opportunity to vote, wherever that may be.*
6. *To "prebunk" is to warn people about misinformation before they see it. Why might it be important to prebunk election myths and misinformation? Can this exhibition help?*
 - a. *The mock vote addresses voter fraud and may help restore confidence in elections. Election legitimacy has been questioned in recent years, and addressing the election security mechanisms may restore faith in the process. The election promotes an appreciation for civic volunteerism and offers pathways to involvement.*

Activity: Cast Your Vote!

First, have the members of your class register to vote on the iPad at the "Registration" station. Students should vote wherever they consider home, either their college address or another permanent residence.

Participate in the mock election! The gallery simulates the five key steps in the election-day voting process in Minnesota. Follow the arrows to learn more about the voter experience!

Looking Now: Democracy Wall

The *Democracy in Dialogue* wall is a space to engage with the ins and outs of American democracy through deliberative, community-based discourse. Student organizers from the Flaten Art Museum, Academic Civic Engagement, and the Institute for Freedom and Community at St. Olaf College will post a series of questions throughout the fall of 2024. This project is based on the "Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy" walls organized by Dr. Nick Longo at Providence College in Providence, Rhode Island. These DID Walls are put up in public spaces with an aim to "create a safe space that supports the development of well-informed and engaged citizens through civil discourse."

Consider: The Role of Setting

1. How does the setting of the Flaten Museum impact the effectiveness of the Democracy in Dialogue wall? How would you describe the physical environment? How does it make *you* feel? What associations do you have with art museums?

- a. *Possible considerations: The Flaten Art Museum, as a public gathering place, may enhance the Democracy Wall's effectiveness by encouraging thoughtful reflection and respectful discourse. However, it might also limit the audience to those who frequent the museum, narrowing the diversity of perspectives. Which St. Olaf students frequent the museum? Which don't?*
2. Does the Flaten Art Museum count as a "public space"?
 - a. *Possible considerations: While the museum is accessible to the public, it is an institutional space within a private college campus. The museum setting can offer a quieter, more introspective environment, but it may not reach as wide or diverse an audience as other "public spaces." For example, Does the Northfield community feel welcome at FAM? On the St. Olaf campus in general?*

Consider: Challenges & Safety

3. What threats exist to the *Democracy in Dialogue* wall?
 - a. *Potential threats include the risk of harmful or divisive statements being posted, which could undermine the wall's purpose of fostering civil discourse.*
4. How would you determine if something was "unsafe" or "threatening" when written on the wall?
 - a. *Unsafe or threatening content could be identified based on criteria such as promoting violence, hate speech, or targeting individuals or groups. However, these guidelines can often have gray areas and people view their definitions differently. If you were organizing a wall, how would you create guidelines that prioritize respect, inclusivity, and constructive dialogue, while also encouraging diverse viewpoints?*

Activity:

Utilize the themes on the *Democracy in Dialogue* wall to inspire group and class conversations. Face-to-face engagement allows for deeper engagement and an opportunity to explore the complexity of issues.

An example of how you can implement a discussion in your class includes:

1. Analyze current responses
 - a. Have your students note any themes in the current responses and note any emerging themes.
 - b. Discuss what is surprising and identify any perspectives or voices seem to be missing.

2. Contribute to the Wall

- a. Encourage students to add their own responses, keeping in mind the existing themes and gaps they've identified.
- b. After contributing, reflect on any changes in the conversation—have new perspectives emerged? Are there still missing voices? If so, whose are they and what might be the reasons they are missing from the wall?

Further reading:

- [Democracy in Dialogue Wall Toolkit.pdf](#)
- [Democracy in Dialogue Walls @ Providence College](#)

Visual Thinking Strategy

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a teaching method that provides an excellent first step for encountering art. This student-centered facilitation method fosters inclusive discussions and encourages viewers to identify what is visibly present on the surface before going deeper, to be aware of what is known—and unknown—about the artwork, and to establish a basis for analysis and interpretation.

This method may be utilized to engage with the archival material in the west (left) gallery. Start by posing the three primary questions below. As a student answers, point to the elements the student is identifying to bring others along, then re-cap the student's observations for the class.

1. What's going on in this picture?
2. What do you see that makes you say that?
3. What more can we find?

Additional Resources

- [New exhibit celebrates 150 years of political engagement on campus](#)
- [VOTE @ St. Olaf](#)
- [Faculty Resources](#) (MORE ideas for engaging democracy in the classroom!)
- [IFC Fall 2024 Events](#) around the theme "Democracy and Dialogue"