

Visual Language Arts Curriculum

Grades: 7 -12

Main Theme: Art reflects human experience – the people, events, emotions and more that fill our lives. The visual arts convey meaning and messages about these experiences and provide opportunities to better understand ourselves and the people and world around us.

Essential Question: How is meaning conveyed in the visual arts and how do we make sense of that meaning?

Essential Goals: Students should be able to interpret and make meaning from visual information and incorporate contextual information into their interpretation. Specifically, students should be able to:

1. Discuss how different artistic techniques, media, and methods convey meaning and/ or evoke an emotion, and/or set a mood or tone.
2. Discuss how an artist's point of view and/or perspective influences their artwork and contributes to the conveyed meaning.
3. Point to visual evidence in a work of art that supports their interpretation of a conveyed message.
4. Create written responses to works of art.
5. Connect their discussions and experiences with works of art to their individual experiences and their classroom learning.

Description:

Visual Language Arts is an English Language Arts aligned museum experience for school groups that focuses on the ways the visual arts communicate messages and convey meaning. The crux of this program is to help students learn how to combine visual information, their own experiences and prior knowledge, and contextual information to determine and interrogate meaning within works of art.

During the experience, different themes and ideas are discussed making clear learning connections between subject matter goals for grades 7 – 12 and works of art in the museum's collection and special exhibitions. Through close-looking, group discussions, and hands-on activities students will explore the topics of authorship, point-of-view and perspective, symbolism, and ambiguity to examine how they contribute to overall understanding and interpretations of works of art, like the ways in which they contribute to understanding and interpretations of written and spoken language. Students will develop and practice skills that are linked to English Language Arts learning standards as well as other learning areas providing an inter/cross-disciplinary learning experience.

The primary themes of *Visual Language Arts* experiences directly connect to major areas of the 7 -12 English Language Arts curriculum for the State of Ohio, primarily: reading, writing, and speaking and listening.

Reading: Students will examine works of art and learn how to identify and discuss visual elements that support specific interpretations, suggest certain messages, and convey specific

meanings. Students will apply the skills they use to approach different texts to the works of art they experience and will develop parallel skills. They will also explore how visual language communicates similarly and differently than written or spoken language.

Writing: Students will engage in various writing activities that will allow them to practice a variety of writing skills that will serve as both creative and reflective points in their museum experience.

Speaking and Listening: Student will take part in guided/facilitated group discussions that will require them to voice their ideas and opinions clearly, listen well to others, and integrate a variety of concepts and viewpoints.

Visual Language Arts museum experiences are scalable and adaptable to meet the learning goals and objectives of each grade level with experiences that build upon students' understandings and help them recognize course material in new contexts.

See Appendix A for a full list of Ohio English Language Arts learning standards supported by Visual Language Arts.

Primary Themes and Topics:

Visual Language Arts experiences are organized around three primary topics that relate to various elements of literature and that are well-suited to the works of art in the Taft's collection. These topics provide solid foundations and points of departure for meaningful discussions and experiences that help students make connections between their classroom learning and their own lives.

Primary Topics:

1. Form
2. Point-of-view and Perspective
3. Symbolism

Themes and major discussion points will vary based on individual lesson plans and the grade level of the student participants.

Form:

The primary components (artistic elements) that make up a work of art. Students will examine these elements individually, and as a whole, to determine how they contribute to message, emotion, and meaning in a work of art. Going beyond mere identification, students will question, probe, and debate how the unique combination of artistic elements in a work of art convey a meaning that may be similar to or different from other works.

Artistic elements to be considered in this topic include line, shape, color, form, space, texture, and value. Students may also discuss the artistic principles of balance, emphasis, harmony, movement, pattern, proportion, repetition, rhythm, unity, and variety.

Example questions:

- What elements do you notice? Shapes, colors, line, etc.?

- Where are these elements in relation to each other?
- What do they remind you of or of what do they make you think?
- How might this work of art be different if X was changed?
- How would you change X to make the artwork more Y

For the final two questions, substitute specifics based on the work of art and the theme, emotion, mood, etc. that you are examining.

Point-of-view and Perspective:

Point-of-view: 1) a particular attitude or way of considering a matter; 2) the position from which something is observed; 3) the type of narrator of a text.

Perspective: 1) the way of visually presenting something to convey dimensionality and position; 2) the narrator's inner thoughts.

Students will examine how someone's experiences, beliefs, and positionality affect how they interpret (make meaning from visual information) works of art. They will explore how an artist's point-of-view and perspective may have affected their artistic production. Students will also examine how artistic perspective can affect how a work of art is read and understood.

Example questions:

- How does the artist want us to feel about the subject? Why do you think so?
- How do you feel about the subject? Why?
- How would you feel about the subject if X was changed? Or if Y was shown as Z?

Discussion questions about perspective and point-of-view should focus on how the meaning of a work of art is affected by artistic perspective and/or how the artist's experiences, worldview, etc. affect the message conveyed by the artwork. For the latter, more information about the artist is necessary. Students may also be asked to infer the artist's point-of-view or perspective based on how they are interpreting the meaning of a work of art. Educators will need to guide students in their inferences and provide contextual information that supports or refutes the groups' ideas. Educators must also be sure to encourage students to explain their inferences using visual information from the work of art.

Symbolism:

Content areas include how artists convey meaning in diverse ways, subtlety, ambiguity, interpretation, prior knowledge, associations, cultural understandings (imagery used in different and diverse cultures that may require knowledge of said culture to understand more completely), etc.

Example topic and content questions:

- What is a symbol?
- What do you notice in this artwork?
- What might the artist mean by including X?
- What do you associate with X? What does X make you think about?
- Why might the artist have included both X and Y in the same artwork?

A note on ambiguity

In addition to the primary topics featured in *Visual Language Arts* there is an additional topic that should be noted and integrated into a museum experience: educators should also be mindful of ambiguity.

Ambiguity is relevant here because visual arts and literature are often considered subjective, in that there can be multiple interpretations and opinions about them. Older students will need to grapple with holding conflicting interpretations of a work of art in the same space. How do we navigate different ideas about works of art? How do we support our viewpoints and incorporate new ideas? There is very rarely only one right interpretation and being able to see the various shades of grey has value in expanding one's thinking and developing problem solving skills.

Conversely, while there is rarely one correct interpretation or meaning, there are interpretations that are more supportable than others. In addition to grappling with ambiguity, students will learn how to evaluate arguments and ideas to determine which conclusions are more likely than others.

Using the Curriculum:

Individual lesson plans may incorporate many themes, but they should each include the primary topics above as a means of helping students explore how one can discern meaning from a work of art. It is important to note that the primary topics work in conjunction to convey meaning. A successful *Visual Language Arts* experience will let students explore each topic in many ways.

Visual Language Arts supports a particular arc of interpretation that helps students incorporate many points of information to arrive at fuller, richer understandings of works of art and the world around them. This arc encourages and rewards students for thinking creatively and working together to understand things that might be unfamiliar.

Arc of interpretation

- Identify elements in a work of art.
 - Identify the organization, presentation, and characteristics of those elements.
 - Figure out meaning by putting these elements and their characteristics into conversation with what you already know, acknowledging/addressing your own frames of references.
 - Gain additional contextual information and consider the interpretations of others.
 - Evaluate interpretations based on added information.