

## Expressing Humanity in Art

**Overview:** Students describe and compare multicultural images of the human figure in terms of their cultural meanings.

**Goals:** This lesson will

**Support concepts and skills:** observation, analysis connected to interpretation, descriptive writing

**Fulfill Learning Standards:** ELA 2, 4, 19, 23; Visual Arts 5, 8

**Practice:** responding and interpreting evidence

**Familiarize students with:** ideas of realism, abstraction, and symbolism; works of art from different cultures; different cultural ideas about the human figure

**Objectives for Students:** Students will

**Be able to:** use adjectives and adverbs; write questions; state an opinion or personal response, and cite evidence for it.

**Understand:** different cultures express their ideas about the human figure in different ways; the meaning of realistic, abstract, and symbol; the human figure can represent a culture's ideals or values.

**Key Questions** (to be answered by students):

1. What adjectives and adverbs can I use to best describe this work of art?
2. What characterizes the variations between “realistic” and “abstract?”
3. What kinds of ideas or values are expressed in the way different cultures present the human figure in art?

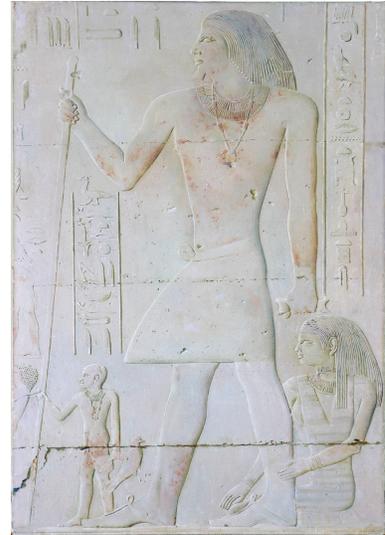
**Materials Needed:** Describing Human Figures in Art record sheet; Books on the art and cultures of Egypt, Greece, and Early Colonial America; Copies of the adjectives/adverbs list generated by students.

### **Museum Objects:**

- *The Hayward Children* by Joseph Goodhue Chandler, oil on canvas, 1843 (1967.1)
- *Fragmentary jar, Herakles Slaying the Hydra*, Greek, ceramic, 350-325 B. C. (2001.3)
- *Portrait of Ti, Royal Architect, from his tomb, Saqqara, 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty* by Joseph Lindon Smith, American, 1863-1950, Canvas, Legacy dimension: H. 0.949 (37 3/8 in.) W. 0.647 (25 1/2 in.), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Mrs. William Amory, 27.554

Any other figurative works of art would also be appropriate for this lesson.

**Pre-Museum Visit** –Discuss the definitions of “realistic,” “abstract,” and “symbol.” Discuss images of people they see in art, the media, or in everyday life --such as comic books, dolls, well-known paintings, public murals or sculpture, or images in church—in terms of how realistic or symbolic these images are compared to real human proportions and features. (You may want to ask students to bring in examples from magazines, advertisements, etc.) Ask students to describe the different styles used to depict the people, and what meaning or feeling the style



*Portrait of Ti, Royal Architect, from his tomb, Saqqara, 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty*

Joseph Lindon Smith, American, 1863-1950  
Canvas

Legacy dimension: H. 0.949 (37 3/8 in.) W. 0.647 (25 1/2 in.)

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
Gift of Mrs. William Amory  
27.554

Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

conveys about the person shown. If time, you may want to revisit the students' Human Proportions in Art record sheet, and reexamine what the students learned about proportions of real human bodies.

As a group, ask students to list adjectives and adverbs they might use to describe a real person. Compile this list and give each student a copy to take during the Museum visit. Make copies of the Describing Human Figures in Art record sheet.

**At the Museum** – At each of the three works of art the students will do three activities: describing, rating, and question-asking. Ask students to look carefully at the work of art and write down adjectives and adverbs they think best describe it. Collect responses, asking students to describe what they see in the artwork that makes them use that particular adjective or adverb. During the discussion, stimulate the students' thinking by asking them to take the pose of each work of art, and ask them how it feels when they are in that pose. Add any new descriptive words to their lists.

After describing the work of art, ask students to rate it on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being the most realistic or naturalistic (the way things appear in nature) and 10 being the most abstract, and to record their rating on their sheets. Finally, ask students to write down a question they have about the artwork.

After the students have viewed all of the works of art, sit them down in one of the galleries and tell them the information about the works of art listed below. **It is important that you preface this information by** praising the careful observing and hypothesizing they did, and by noting that “formulating hypotheses (backed up with evidence of what we see) is a great way to begin to understand a work of art (or anything) even when we don't know much about it.” Also explain: “However, when we are given the chance to learn more about the work of art, our ideas about it might change, and this is fine. Here is some information that you might not know from just looking at the work of art:”

***Portrait of Ti, Royal Architect, from his tomb, Saqqara, 5<sup>th</sup> Dynasty*** by Joseph Lindon Smith, American, 1863-1950, Canvas, Legacy dimension: H. 0.949 (37 3/8 in.) W. 0.647 (25 1/2 in.), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Gift of Mrs. William Amory, 27.

This is an oil painting by a 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century New England artist of a Egyptian wall relief. The Egyptians carved these figures into the walls of tombs. They wanted to show many parts of the figure at once, even though in real life you would not see, for example, both eyes or shoulders if you look at a person from the side. The figures are not naturalistic, (not the way we would see them in nature) but instead are more symbolic in order to show as much of the figure as they could.

***Fragmentary jar, Herakles Slaying the Hydra***, Greek (from a Greek colony in what is now called Italy), ceramic, 350-325 B. C.

The Greeks valued the idea of harmony and thought the human body was beautiful. They drew and sculpted images of the human body to look more naturalistic (you will notice that the leg is tucked under and looks the way you might see it in real life). However, compared to most real human bodies, they showed the human figure in what they believed was its ideal form. Often a figure in art was modeled after a number of different “ideal” parts of real people.

***The Hayward Children*** by Joseph Goodhue Chandler, oil on canvas, 1843

During the time when this portrait was painted, portrait painters traveled from town to town offering to paint people in exchange for money. Often the painter had already painted a generic body, and left a blank space for the head in order to fill in the face of a specific person. Unlike the Greeks who studied the form of the human figure, the traveling painters' Puritan morals forbid them from looking too closely at the human body. Notice how the clothes are all buttoned up, and the body positions are stiff, not gesturing. The people who paid for these paintings wanted a record of a loved one, but probably could not afford to hire more skilled painters who could have painted the entire figure in a more realistic way.

**Post-Museum Visit** – Reflect on the descriptions and ratings of the works of art by asking, “What are some ways that artists in different cultures showed the human figure? How real or abstract or symbolic were the faces and the bodies? What are some differences and similarities between two or three of the cultures we looked at? Do you think the artist was trying to represent a real person, or a symbol of a person? What do you think this culture values as shown by how it depicts the human figure? What more information would you need to decide this question? What questions do you have about the art or its culture?”

Compile students' questions about the artwork or cultures. Divide the class into three groups, and ask each group to research the culture of each of the three objects in order to answer their questions.

Ask students to use the adjectives, adverbs, and their questions in a writing assignment: a poem (haiku or other format), or an imaginary dialogue between two of the works of art.

**Supportive Material:** Describing Human Figures in Art record sheet

**Documentation and Assessment Options:** Keep a record of students' ideas about the different ways the human figure is depicted in the three cultures, and the values expressed by the figures, and compare it to how they respond to figurative art work of other cultures (take special note of the students' use of the terms “realistic” and “abstract”). Add to the adjective and adverb lists and keep it in the classroom for future writing projects. Keep their writing assignments in a portfolio to compare with later writing assignments.

**Links to Other Curriculum:** This lesson pairs with Human Proportions in Real Life and in Art

Author of the lesson: Laura Howick



## Describing Human Figures in Art

	[Artwork 1]	[Artwork 2]	[Artwork 3]
Adjectives			
Adverbs			
Rating on a Scale of 1 to 10 Most Realistic – Most Abstract			