

## Inquiry

**Overview:** Through looking at and wondering about works of art students practice inquiry skills needed in all curricular areas.

**Goals:** This lesson will

Support concepts and skills: questioning skills, methods of Inquiry

Fulfill Learning Standards: Science Inquiry Strands 1-4; Visual Art 5.

Practice: observation, investigation and inquiry skills

Familiarize students with: works of art, genres, styles

**Objectives for Students:** Students will

Be able to: observe a complex object or event and develop questions that support an investigation.

Understand: that there are different kinds of questions, and what kinds of information each elicits; some questions lead to more interesting information and ideas.



*Study for the robe of the prophet Hosea for the mural "Triumph of Religion" in the Boston Public Library*  
John Singer Sargent

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

1. What useful questions can I ask that will help me get information about this object?
2. Why are some questions more interesting or useful than others?
3. Which kinds of questions yield the most interesting path of investigation?

**Museum Objects:** Any work of art will work for this lesson, but the following are recommended:

Object shown is *Study for the robe of the prophet Hosea for the mural "Triumph of Religion" in the Boston Public Library* by John Singer Sargent, oil on canvas, mural installed 1895, Gift of Mrs. Harlan K. Simonds (1947.5)

*Synchromy (Eidos)* by Morgan Russell, oil on canvas mounted on board, about 1922-23 (1998.1)

*Tureen*, French, cast tin-glazed earthenware, 1740, Norcross Collection (1938.97)

**Pre-Museum Visit** – Ask students how many different kinds of questions they can identify, and make a list. Discuss why we ask questions, and the purpose of different kinds of questions. What kind of information does each elicit? Which are useful in what kinds of situations? Discuss the difference between yes/no questions and other kinds, such as “thinking questions,” or “I wonder...” questions.

**At the Museum** – Ask students to work in pairs. Each pair will choose an object to focus on. Students will use the Inquiry Activity Worksheet to observe and discuss their object, and then come up with a list of questions about it. (You may want students to work in pairs or in small groups.) You can stop with the first page of the worksheet, or go on to the second page, which asks students to make hypotheses. (If you think your students need an introduction to asking questions of a work of art, you can introduce them to the process by using the “Investigation Worksheet,” followed by a reflection about questions.)

If you have included the hypothesis activity, ask partners to volunteer to share their hypothesis as the group looks at their object. If you invite a Museum staff person to attend, students can share their thinking and their hypotheses, and then talk with the Museum staff about the works of art.

Some of the students' questions will have definitive answers that the Museum staff can address (for example, "When was this made?"). But other questions have no one right answer, and are a matter of personal interpretation.

**Post-Museum Visit – Reflection:** Which were the "best" questions, and why? Pairs will score each other's questions, giving a high score to questions that are interesting or would elicit interesting or important information. Return to the discussion about effective questions.

Return to the Museum and repeat the activity in a different gallery. After they are familiar with the activity you can transfer it to another curricular area.

**Supportive Materials:** Inquiry Activity worksheet, Investigation worksheet

**Documentation and Assessment Options:** Keep copies of successive question lists; analyze whether students' questions are becoming more sophisticated; Pre- and post-test: What is an effective question?

**Links to Other Curriculum:** Use a similar worksheet and process applied to science, history, music, literature, or math (equations, geometry, estimation).

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## Inquiry Activity

**Work with a partner. Pick an object that interests both of you.**

### Asking questions about the work of art.

**Your challenge is to see how many questions you and your partner can think of to ask about this work of art. Write each question on a separate line below. There are many kinds of questions. You can make questions beginning with what, how, who, why, when, or where. Make each question as specific as possible. For example, instead of asking “Why is it like that?” ask a more specific question about something you see.**

**When you have written as many questions as you can think of (or if the time is up) turn to the next page.**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.
- 11.
- 12.
- 13.
- 14.



**Choosing the most interesting question.**

**Which of the questions you have written is the most interesting to the two of you? Pick one question that you really would like to know the answer to.**

**Write it here:**

**Making a hypothesis.**

**A hypothesis is a guess that is based on the evidence you have. Looking back at the object, discuss with your partner what you guess the answer might be to the question you wrote above. What do you see or know about the object that supports this hypothesis? What is your evidence? Write your hypothesis and evidence below.**

## Investigation Worksheet

Use this guide to help you investigate this work of art.

⊕ What do you notice? What do you observe?

⊕ What is the nature of the thing? Why do you think this piece was created? Who made this and why? What was its purpose? What is the artist trying to say? How do you think was it used?

⊕ What questions do you have about what you see? If you were to interpret this work, what meanings might you find in it? What does it seem to be saying to you?

⊕ Do you notice any connections with something you already know? What are they? Are there any works of art similar to these in your daily life, your home, your community?

⊕ Do you notice any relationship between the parts? What are they?

⊕ Do you have any guesses or hunches about how to explain why it's like this?

⊕ Does it now serve the same purpose for which it was originally made?

⊕ What can you tell about how the work was made?

⊕ How does this work make you feel?

⊕ What further information would you like in order to understand what you see? Think of any as many specific questions as you can. Write your questions on a piece of paper.