

# Thinking Through Art: Transforming Museum Curriculum



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**Abstract** What kinds of programming should an art museum’s education department offer to the K-12 school community? How can we best contribute to students’ current and future intellectual development? What type of programming best fits the needs of students and teachers, while also addressing the unique aspects of the museum setting?

At the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum we recently asked these questions while conducting a three-year quasi-experimental research study called Thinking Through Art. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s Arts in Education Model Development and Dissemination grant program, our research assessed how students developed critical-thinking skills through learning to look at art in our School Partnership Program. To best support this we realized that we needed to shift our focus from teaching thematic and historical lessons to providing more opportunities to look at and think about art. In this article, we reflect on this process and discuss how a new emphasis on “learning to look” helped students develop skills that are essential to both the museum and school contexts.

## WHERE DO SCHOOLS AND MUSEUMS INTERSECT?

Because art museums want to attract the K-12 school audience, education departments develop tour topics designed to complement classroom curricula. Elementary teachers eagerly sign up for tours that show their students what life was like in colonial America or ancient Egypt, while high school foreign language teachers bring classes to see French Impressionism or Spanish art. And why not? Textbooks use reproductions of artwork to

bring excitement and variety to the subject at hand, so it makes sense to go to the source to illustrate the school curriculum even more dramatically, using encounters with art objects to bring the culture of different times and places alive for students of all ages.

But at the same time, museum educators believe that there is more to learn from a museum visit than curriculum-driven subject matter.<sup>1</sup> “Looking skills” are seen as integral to the experience (especially for multiple-visit programs), the assumption being that students will develop these skills even if the primary goal of the visit is to complement an area of the school curriculum. Because museum experiences are understood to be about direct encounters with works of art—learning from primary source material—it is clearly important for students to develop some looking skills of their own for the art encounter to be truly meaningful. While museum educators have developed a range of strategies for helping students look closely during museum visits, the emphasis of most school programs remains on satisfying the content needs of the school curriculum. But is there a better way for art museums to serve the K–12 community?

There is now a growing body of evidence to suggest that the skills involved in “learning to look”—observation, inference, speculation, etc.—are the kinds of critical-thinking skills that are essential to success in subjects across the school curriculum.<sup>2</sup> But what does a curriculum to develop looking skills look like? One answer is Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), a sequential curriculum designed specifically for beginning viewers.<sup>3</sup> The VTS approach concentrates on giving students ongoing practice in looking at and talking about works of art by shifting the teacher’s role from information provider to discussion facilitator. Not surprisingly, this iconoclastic approach sent shock waves throughout the museum education field, generating new and much-needed discussion about the nature of museum teaching.<sup>4</sup> A new possibility was presented to the field: that learning to look at art was a form of content worth pursuing in and of itself. Controversial as the VTS skills-based approach was within the museum community, there were even larger questions about how K–12 teachers would respond, especially during a time when a focus on learning facts in preparation for high stakes testing has become increasingly important. However, as Abigail Housen demonstrated in her study of the Byron, Minnesota students who participated in the VTS curriculum over several years, students who learned to use certain thinking skills through art discussions were able to transfer those skills to other contexts.<sup>5</sup> By helping students develop looking skills in sequential, multiple-

visit programs, museums are in fact still supporting school learning by focusing on transferable skills rather than content.

In 2003 the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum received a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education to research how critical-thinking skills are developed in the unique environment of an art museum. In the course of this project, the Gardner's longstanding School Partnership Program underwent a curriculum shift, moving from the traditional focus on classroom curriculum to a new focus on learning to look using the VTS approach. How and why this shift played out at the Gardner offers a fascinating case study in museum-school collaboration.

### **HOW THE GARDNER SCHOOL PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM DEVELOPED**

The Gardner's School Partnership Program (SPP) is a multiple-visit program that annually reaches over 800 K–8 students, forty teachers, and ten administrators and specialists in five neighboring public schools. Created in 1996 to foster stronger relationships between the Gardner and the community, the program in its initial years focused on connecting the classroom curriculum to the Gardner's collection. For instance, while studying Greek and Roman mythology, fifth-grade students focused on the story of Hercules by comparing the hero's depiction in the Gardner's 15th-century painting by Piero della Francesca to images from contemporary culture. In another lesson, students were asked to identify the gods and goddesses in the museum's large ceiling painting of *The Coronation of Hebe* by noticing details of dress and symbolic attributes. For the studio component, students created their own mythical creatures in colored plasticine based on attributes discussed in the museum galleries. To complement students' math curriculum, one classroom teacher worked with museum educators to develop a lesson on symmetry using an arrangement of 17th-century Mexican tiles in the Gardner's Spanish Cloister. Afterwards, students demonstrated their understanding of symmetry and balance through designing and painting patterns on ceramic tiles.

Making these kinds of subject-driven curricular connections was important when the partnership was developing, and helped forge strong bonds between individual teachers and the Gardner Museum; this approach has been the hallmark of many successful museum-school partnerships.<sup>6</sup> The SPP curriculum was, in effect, a series of individual museum visits tailored to the interests of participating teachers; visits were not necessarily designed to

build sequentially across a single school year or from one grade level to the next.

The focused nature of the Gardner's collection—primarily Italian Renaissance art—made it more difficult than it would have been in an encyclopedic museum to construct a curriculum sequenced by subject matter. Over the years, teachers had requested subject-driven lesson topics (symmetry or life in 19th-century Boston, for instance) that were only tangentially connected to individual works of art in the collection. The Department of Education research grant presented the opportunity to take the partnership program to the next level by: (1) revisiting program goals with our partners and (2) studying what students were actually learning. As museum educators, we wanted to refocus the curriculum on the kinds of ideas that could best be explored in a museum setting. At the same time, inspired by Housen's research on the relationship between art viewing and critical thinking, we wanted to conduct our own investigation of how learning to look at art helped partnership program students develop critical-thinking skills. Given our long-standing partnership with neighboring schools, we felt that this study could contribute to the ongoing debate about the role of the arts in student academic achievement.

### **RESEARCH INFORMING PRACTICE: RESTRUCTURING CURRICULUM AND PEDAGOGY**

In revisiting program goals, both school and museum educators agreed that the primary outcome should be students who were skilled at looking at and interpreting art for themselves. (A second goal was to help students feel comfortable in the museum setting, which clearly depends in part on knowing what to do there.) We realized that if we want students to derive their own information from works of art, we needed to reorganize the curriculum so that students could do just that—spend more time looking at art. After extensive conversations with partnering teachers and administrators, the SPP goals were refocused to emphasize learning to look at and make meaning from works of art using the VTS approach.

VTS starts with asking three questions to prompt students to make observations and provide evidence for their ideas:

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



Tobin School third graders discussing *Portrait of Juana of Austria with a Young Girl* (1561), attributed to Sofonsiba Anguissola, in the Titian Room at the Gardner Museum. Photo by Sara Lasser, courtesy of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.

By slowing down and carefully looking at and discussing works of art, students have unique opportunities to apply previous experiences and knowledge to puzzle over meaning in the artworks—in other words, the students make meaning on their own terms. Throughout the group discussions, museum educators respond neutrally to each comment, accepting all ideas equally by paraphrasing the students' comments and linking similar ideas so that the students learn to listen, respect, and share ideas with their peers.

In collaboration with VTS co-author Philip Yenawine, Gardner staff

identified artworks in the Gardner Museum collection that were developmentally appropriate for each participating grade. The Gardner's SPP curriculum was modified to begin in third grade with simple images that lend themselves to storytelling, featuring multiple figures in a familiar or recognizable situation. In fourth and fifth grades, as the students become more adept at decoding images, the imagery increases in complexity, with puzzling attributes that will challenge them to build upon previous experiences and play off each others' responses. VTS encourages students to make observations and inferences based on what they see, and also to back up their assertions with evidence.

To support the older students' more analytical ways of decoding works of art, lessons for fourth and fifth grades feature additional questions as well as highlight various aspects of the museum collection such as furniture, archives, and conservation. Fourth graders are asked to further contemplate characters for mood and personality, consider the space and setting of a scene, compare near and far objects, and reflect on the artist's positioning while making the picture. Fifth-grade questions challenge students to look for contrasts in the picture, probe deeper for the story or action taking place, and consider the artist's motivation and interest in making the artwork.

In addition, writing and sketching activities were added to both classroom- and museum-based lessons so that students have the opportunity to reflect and respond individually to works of art. Prompts for writing mirrored those used during the group discussions to reinforce ways of looking and to encourage the students to provide evidence for their thoughts. The corresponding studio projects were also redesigned to be more open-ended rather than to reinforce specific concepts or art terms introduced by museum educators. For example, after discussing the Mexican tiles that line the walls of the Spanish Cloister, fourth graders were encouraged to create their own tile decorations inspired by the portrayed creatures, figures, and vegetation. These curriculum changes result in engaging discussions and activities that not only complement each other but become more sophisticated over the students' three years in the program.

A typical SPP unit now begins with a classroom visit led by a museum educator who goes to the school and introduces students to the Gardner Museum and the VTS process through facilitating group discussions with two images. Students are then prompted with the VTS discussion questions to write independently about a third image. A few days later, students visit the museum to continue looking at and discussing works of art. Students

come before the museum is open to the public so they can sit on the floor and talk without the distraction of other visitors. This hour-long gallery lesson typically includes the discussion of two objects coupled with writing and sketching activities. Students then spend the next forty-five minutes in a studio space involved in a hands-on art project that directly relates to the group discussions. By visiting the Gardner several times (up to four times in one academic year), students develop personal connections with the museum building, its collection and special exhibitions, become confident sharing their ideas about images, and feel comfortable in the museum environment—skills that cannot be gained from a one-time field trip to an art museum.

This approach is particularly appropriate for the special character of the Gardner Museum. Created by the extraordinary Isabella Stewart Gardner, her museum was designed to encourage visitors to respond to art personally and profoundly. Imaginatively arranged, each gallery contains a wide variety of art objects but no labels, encouraging visitors of all ages to make their own meaning. The Gardner provides the perfect setting for students to actively develop their own responses to art. As a result, students learn to look at all kinds of works of art—paintings, sculptures, textiles, and even the museum’s garden courtyard—with assurance.

While the overall response has been positive in four of the Gardner’s five partner schools, the transition from a content-driven program to one focused on the process of learning was difficult for a few teachers, especially for the handful who work with advanced classes. These teachers felt that VTS did not challenge their students sufficiently, and thought it was unreasonable to expect their students to focus on one object for twenty minutes.

The new approach met with strong resistance at one school in particular. Although the principal was supportive, many of the teachers were unhappy about the curriculum changes. VTS seemed counter to everything they felt was important about education. Unwilling to see “learning to look” as an important piece of knowledge acquisition, these teachers felt that by not focusing on an artist’s dates, stylistic traits, or biographical information, museum educators let students leave without “knowing” new concepts. Often these teachers would interrupt a VTS discussion to ask the museum educator to explain the importance of the artist, or an art term (perspective, for instance) so that the students could, as one teacher put it, “leave with something.” Gardner educators are continuing to explore new ways to collaborate with these teachers through the development of shared goals for teaching and learning in the museum environment. Although direct

curriculum connections are no longer the focus of the SPP lessons, teachers are still finding ways to transfer the skills developed through art-looking in classroom activities, especially in the area of literacy. Several teachers now extend the museum experience through post-visit writing and sketching activities using the open-ended VTS discussion questions as prompts. Students who once dreaded writing now are bursting with excitement to pull out their museum journals to write about a new image. This enthusiasm is shared by teachers and principals, and has sparked exciting ongoing conversations about teaching and learning. Each partner school has now committed to training its teachers to facilitate VTS discussions in the 2007–08 school year, which will greatly expand the opportunities for partnering classes to look at and discuss works of art.

## THE GARDNER STUDY: DEFINING AND MEASURING CRITICAL THINKING

The major challenge posed in the Thinking Through Art project was how to articulate and measure critical-thinking skills. What exactly, we asked, does thinking look like in the context of an art museum? To answer this question, we worked with project researchers Marianna Adams and Jessica Luke of the Institute for Learning Innovation (ILI) to develop a rubric for critical-thinking skills relevant to learning with works of art. Drawing on Arthur Costa and Bena Kallick's series on the habits of thoughtful individuals, as well as Abigail Housen's work and data from the teachers and students in the SPP, we created a rubric that identifies seven primary skills that students use in their discussions of artworks, listed here with examples drawn from student discussions.<sup>7</sup>

**Observing:** Noticing specific features of a work of art.

- *It looks kind of dark. The clouds are red so it looks like sunset is coming.*

**Interpreting:** Developing a narrative about the people in a work of art, what kinds of emotions they show, and what activities they are engaged in.

- *A woman has been killed and she's getting buried. And all the people, they're all sad because one of them is crying.*

**Evaluating:** Expressing personal opinions about a work of art.

- *If I painted it, I'd probably be amazed with myself—like whoa, I have this much art inside of me!*

**Associating:** Using personal experience or prior knowledge as a basis for understanding a work of art.

- *I can tell that there's a servant because he has a thing on his hair like lunch ladies wear, the hair net.*

**Problem Finding:** Looking for information or generating questions based on puzzling or interesting aspects of art objects.

- *I'm wondering why the guy on the right has a shell on his coat because we don't wear shells on our coats.*

**Comparing:** Noticing similarities and differences between works of art.

- *They kind of look alike, but you can tell that they're different because one has long hair and the one has short hair. And the other one has different armor and the other one has another sort of armor, so maybe they're different kinds of people or like a tribe or something like that.*

**Flexible Thinking:** Remaining open to multiple possibilities.

- *She might be a maid because of the way her hair's tied up, but she might also not be a maid 'cause of the way she dresses.*

In addition to the seven critical-thinking skills, the rubric includes an evidence scale. Most educators agree that providing clear and compelling evidence for ideas is an essential part of critical thinking. Rather than making it a separate category, we found that it made more sense to show it as an underlying habit of mind, since it can be exercised in any of the categories.

- *The people that live there in that palace are probably very wealthy because there's a lot of gold things around.<sup>8</sup>*

Armed with this rubric, researchers collected data from students in third, fourth, and fifth grades in two SPP schools and two control schools. Control schools were also Boston public schools that were similar to the partner schools in terms of: (1) test scores; (2) race/ethnicity and socio-economic status of the school population; and (3) instructional philosophy. In order to understand what skills students had acquired as a result of the SPP, we tested two methods that asked students to talk about art on their own. The first method took place at school, where students were recorded as they talked about an art poster. We also recorded student conversations as they explored a single museum gallery on their own. Called an “untour” by the ILI

researchers who developed it, this technique allows students to follow their own interests and to choose what works of art they want to discuss. For each untour, a group of six students from one class were taken to a gallery and each given a small digital recorder and a clip-on microphone. Students were asked to simply talk out loud as they explored the room, either individually or in conversation with other students. Both the poster interviews and the untours were then transcribed and studied by the research team, allowing us to compare the performance of students in the SPP with peers who had not participated in the program.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### **1. Students in the SPP generated significantly more instances of critical-thinking skills both in individual poster interviews and group “untours.”**

When the treatment group (students in the SPP) and control group interviews were analyzed for differences in the amount of critical-thinking skills used, statistically significant differences emerged. Compared with peers who did not participate in the program, those who did showed statistically significant improvement in five out of seven thinking skills: associating; comparing; flexible thinking; and most strongly, in observing and interpreting.

### **2. Students in the SPP had more to say and were more likely to provide evidence for their thinking.**

Treatment students had more to say about works of art than did control students, making more observations and noticing more about art objects. Treatment students talked twice as much about artwork in the poster interviews and untours as did the control students. Students' use of evidence to support their statements about artworks also differed significantly between treatment and control groups, with treatment students significantly more likely to offer justification for their ideas.

This study confirmed through research what many museum educators have come to believe through personal experience: that regular practice in looking at and discussing works of art using the VTS technique is remarkably effective in developing students' capacity to think critically. Our results, in combination with similar results from other studies in schools and museums,

bolster the argument that learning to look at art should be an integral part of every child's experience.

In addition, work on the research project brought partnership teachers and museum staff to new understandings about how an art museum could help support the work of urban schools. Teachers marveled at the ways in which the VTS approach helped students develop speaking and listening skills, encouraged them to discuss, debate, and respect divergent points of view, and stretched their capacity to investigate and understand unfamiliar objects—skills that are important across the curriculum. By shifting from school curriculum connections to the VTS approach, the SPP is now supporting the work of participating teachers in different but perhaps more important ways. We now know that an art discussion curriculum not only teaches students how to look at art—a skill that is essential to the life-long habit of museum going—but also supports the development of critical-thinking skills.

## CONCLUSION

The Gardner study demonstrates that an art-viewing program using the VTS approach in both the classroom and museum can also promote the development of critical-thinking skills. The unique characteristics of VTS teaching—encouraging students to make their own observations and interpretations, to remain open to multiple interpretations, and to back up their ideas with evidence—are clearly reflected in the Thinking Through Art rubric. We believe that talking about art is one of the best ways for students to develop and practice these essential skills.

Since looking is central to the museum experience, why has it taken such a back seat in museum-school programs? And why is it reemerging now, as evidenced by this issue of the *Journal of Museum Education*? Some possible reasons have been touched on already, having to do with time (learning to look takes more time than the traditional one-shot field trip) as well as teacher expectations. But the growing body of evidence showing that the development of looking skills goes hand-in-hand with the development of basic thinking skills suggests there are more fundamental ways in which museums can serve the K-12 community. The enthusiastic response of the majority of the Gardner's partnering schools is an indication that teachers themselves are looking for new ways to use museum-based programs to support student learning.

Over the past thirty years museum educators have developed a variety of ways to empower students and teachers to use works of art.<sup>9</sup> The Gardner study, among others, suggests that multiple visit, discussion-based programs enable students to look at and make sense of not only artworks, but of the larger world around them. It's time for art museum and K-12 educators to revisit the emphasis on single field trips tied to school subject matter, and to consider making deeper curriculum connections through approaches that help students develop fundamental thinking skills through learning to look.

## NOTES

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8. All quotes from student transcripts from Year 3 data collection of the Thinking Through Art research study.
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