Classroom Activity
Dramatizing Art: A Tableau Vivant

This activity has been designed as a pre-visit exercise for students who will tour the European collection at the Hood. It can also be used independent of a museum visit to teach students about storytelling in European art.

The goal of this activity is to stage a tableau vivant or “living picture” of a work of European art as a way to look carefully and think critically about it.

Age Level: This activity was designed for 5th graders but can be adapted for younger and older students.

Materials needed for this activity:
- There are four paintings to choose from for this activity. They are included below. These images can be projected using an LCD projector or they can be printed on a color copier to create a handout or transparency.
- Background Information on each of the four works (also included below)
- Overhead or LCD projector
- Space to stage a scene
- Optional: costumes and props

Introduction:
Share with students that by looking carefully at works of art, they can discover many clues about the people who made them and the world in which they lived. In this activity, students are going to slow down, look closely, and think about what they see as they dramatize a work of art.

Students will be staging a tableau vivant, which means “living picture” in the French language. They will look carefully and “become” a character in a painting, silently holding a pose. This activity reinforces the idea that looking at art is an active, not passive, experience and understanding a work of art takes time and effort.
Looking Activity:
Show the class each of the works you intend to use.

Step 1: Assign characters to the students. This could be done randomly by picking names out of a hat. If you want to assign a director to each group, you can put that person in charge of arranging the characters. Some students should also serve as the audience. Ask all students to look carefully at each of the characters in the painting and describe the following details:

- Clothing (colors, texture, whether it seems fancy or plain, etc.)
- Pose (the way the body is positioned)
- Facial expression
- Other details (what the person is holding or carrying, what surrounds the person, his or her relationship to others in the work of art, and so on)

Step 2: After taking note of these details, the student assigned to a character should think about what the artist is telling them about the personality of the figure they are portraying.

Have each student practice their pose and facial expression, either alone or in their group. It is optional to use costumes and props. If you do not, you can simply remind students that because they do not have costumes and props, they will need to use their imagination for things such as gold armor and cloaks.

Step 3: When the students are ready, ask them to stage their tableau vivant for the rest of the class for one minute. That means they need to stay in character, in place, and completely silent for one minute. Then, that group can share their thoughts about their characters with the class and the students in the audience can share what they noticed. The audience should be thinking about whether the actors depicted the scene accurately and if it seemed as if the actors really looked carefully and thought about the person they were portraying.

Step 4: At this point, you can share information about the painting (available at the end of this lesson and labeled as Background Information). To conclude the experience, there could be an encore performance of the tableau vivant.

Please visit the Hood Museum of Art to see a wide range of original works of art from around the world. There is no charge for admission and the museum is open every day of the week except Monday. Free tours for K-12 school groups as well as programs for adults, teens, and families are available. Visit the museum's web site to learn more.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Pietro Vannucci, called Perugino, and workshop

Virgin and Child with Saints
About 1500
Oil and tempera on panel

This painting was made for the altar of a church during the Renaissance, a time when artists achieved great realism in depicting the human body, the landscape, and three-dimensional space. It shows a group of figures important to the Christian religion. Each of the figures has a halo over their head, showing that they are holy figures, sacred and deserving of special respect. Each one also has attributes that help identify who they are, such as something they are wearing, holding, or carrying.

Mary (the seated figure in the middle) is shown holding her baby, Jesus, and wearing blue, one of her attributes. Mary is highly loved and respected by Christians. That is why she is shown on a pedestal, high above the other figures in the painting.

Jesus (the baby in Mary’s lap). Christians believe that Jesus was the son of God who was sent to Earth in human form and born of Mary. He grew up to be a religious teacher and leader. He is making a sign of blessing with his right hand, holding up two fingers. The baby Jesus is not wearing any clothes to show that even though he is the son of God, he is also human and just like any other baby boy.

Saint James (second from the left) is carrying his attribute, a pilgrim’s staff, the long stick in his hand. A pilgrim is someone who goes on a journey to a holy place for religious reasons. James is known for traveling from Jerusalem to Spain to convince people to become Christians.

Saint Anthony Abbot (furthest left) is an old man who always wears a brown robe with a cloak and cowl neck, clothing worn by a monk. Monks are men who choose to live in a religious community and spend lots of time every day praying and thinking. Another of his attributes is the stick with a T-shaped handle, which looks like a crutch to help people walk. It may be there to show that he has made a promise to help the disabled.

Saint Francis of Assisi (second from the right) also wears a brown robe to show that he is a monk, like Saint Anthony. His robe is tied with a cord that has three knots in it. The three knots represent what he has promised to do in order to serve God—give up all of his money (poverty), agree not to marry so he can focus on God (chastity), and follow the word of God as written in the Bible (obedience). Though you probably won’t be able to see it in this reproduction, St. Francis also has marks on his hands and feet called stigmata. These represent the wounds that Christ received when he was crucified on the cross and show how closely St. Francis is identified with Christ.

The figure on the far right is believed to be a local saint, known to the church community where this was displayed. Although he resembles figures in other Perugino paintings, he has not been clearly identified. He is reading a Bible and wears a bishop’s cope, a special cloak worn during religious services such as a mass.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Master Jacomo, also known as the Candlelight Master,
The Arrest of Christ
1620s
Oil on canvas

This painting tells a story from the Bible about the life of Jesus Christ. Christians believe that Jesus was the son of God who was sent to Earth in human form. He was a religious teacher and leader who lived about 2000 years ago. His teachings led to the creation of a whole new religion and challenged the beliefs and policies of those who were in power.

At the end of his life, Jesus was arrested by Roman soldiers. They punished him by nailing him to a cross and leaving him there to die. This painting tells the story of his arrest. Judas, one of Jesus’s twelve disciples (his closest friends and followers), identified him to the Romans soldiers by kissing him on the cheek so they could tell him apart from his disciples. It is said that Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, which is what he was paid for his services by the Roman rulers.

This dramatic scene is typical of paintings created during a period of time known as the Baroque. Many Baroque painters were interested in creating scenes that combine naturalism (when people and objects look as they do in real life) with lots of drama. This painter created the drama in the scene with light. This strong contrast between light and shadow, called chiaroscuro (pronounced kee-ARE-uh-scoor-oh), makes objects look three-dimensional and creates a sense of atmosphere and mood.

The main source of light in this painting is from a lantern, held by the soldier on the far left. He holds the light with his arm outstretched so his face is in shadow but the decorative costume he wears is still visible. The other soldier, whose armor gleams from the light of the lantern, is reaching out to grab Christ by his collar. The man standing close to Christ is Judas, shown as an older man with dark hair and a beard. His face is mostly in shadow, but he seems sad as he looks intently at Christ.

Although Christ and Judas appear in the traditional clothing of Biblical times, the Roman soldiers are dressed the way French soldiers and wealthy people of the French court would have dressed in the 1620s. The artist wanted to show the people of his own time that they were just as capable of betraying Christ as Judas was. He wanted them to imagine themselves in the role of the soldiers. By doing so, he was reminding them to be humble and live according to the teachings of the Bible, lest they betray Christ as well.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Lawrence Alma-Tadema
*The Sculpture Gallery*
1874
Oil on canvas

English artist Lawrence Alma-Tadema painted *The Sculpture Gallery* in 1874, his largest painting at nine by seven feet. It is still in its original frame.

The figures in the painting are shopping for sculptures in an ancient Roman shop. They are in a special room that was reserved for important, wealthy customers. In the background of the painting, the rest of the shop is visible. A person, seen from the back, is working behind the counter. That part of the shop is filled with less expensive plaster reproductions and small-scale bronze sculptures that were sold to the general public.

Alma-Tadema has painted himself (the man pointing) and his family as ancient Romans. His second wife and two children are standing next to him. His brother-in-law and sister-in-law (his wife’s brother and sister) are both sitting. The other person is a slave, identified by the necklace worn by slaves in ancient Rome.

The slave is showing the family a dark-colored *labrum*, or basin, decorated with the mythological creature Scylla. According to legend, Scylla was a beautiful nymph (or sea goddess) who attracted the attention of Glaucus, a fisherman. Glaucus became a merman after eating magical blades of grass so that he could be with her. A sorceress, Circe, was in love with Glaucus and out of jealousy turned Scylla into a monster so Glaucus would stop chasing her.

Most of the sculptures seen in this painting are based on real ancient works of art that Alma-Tadema saw during visits to Herculaneum and Pompeii in the 1860s. He sketched and photographed these objects and used them in this painting. Alma Tadema wanted to impress viewers with his lifelike recreation of the ancient world. The whole painting was intended to comment upon the taste and values of people acquiring works of art.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION
Louis de Silvestre, French, 1675-1760
*Alexander and Diogenes*
About 1750
Oil on canvas

This French painting is based on several ancient stories that tell of a meeting between Alexander the Great and the philosopher Diogenes. Alexander the Great was the King of Macedonia from 356 to 323 B.C.E. He was a military genius who conquered most of the land known to the ancient Greeks, forging a great empire. He died at the age of 32. Diogenes was a philosopher who also lived during the fourth century B.C.E. A philosopher is a person who devotes his life to thinking about the big questions, seeking answers to the way things are, or the way life should be. Diogenes was considered a cynical philosopher. He despised material possessions and lived extremely simply, close to nature. In fact, it is believed that he made his home in an empty wine barrel.

As the stories tell, Alexander was such a great admirer of Diogenes that when he finally met the philosopher, he offered him anything he wanted from his vast kingdom. Diogenes replied that all he wanted from Alexander was for him to stand aside because he was blocking the sun.

This response was rather rude considering that Alexander was a very important man. But rather than being insulted, Alexander was impressed by Diogenes’ truthfulness and he said that if he were not Alexander, he would choose to be Diogenes.

Alexander’s wealth and position in this painting is contrasted with Diogenes’ simplicity. Alexander is set among his soldiers and servants, dressed in golden armor with a flowing red cape. The light shines directly upon him and a classical palace fills the background. Diogenes is dressed simply and lies upon the ground inside his wine barrel. His only possessions are his instruments of study, a compass and a roll of paper. He is set against a natural landscape.

The painting captures the climactic moment in the story when Diogenes responds to Alexander’s offer. Diogenes gestures with his hand as he asks the king to move out of the light.

This subject was an unusual one for a French painter, since it had the potential of casting doubt over the authority of the king. The French court under the reign of Louis the XV was lavish and in 1750 the king was largely unpopular. Louis de Silvestre appears to have painted this work outside the country in Dresden, Germany, where he had become the First Painter to the King of Poland. The character behind Alexander, who directs his gaze toward the viewer, appears to be a self-portrait of the artist.