Learning to Look Lesson: Ancient Greek Pottery

This resource will allow you to lead your students through careful observation and analysis of a beautifully preserved and decorated ancient Greek pot. It is based on the Learning to Look method created by the Hood Museum of Art. This discussion-based approach will introduce you and your students to the five steps involved in exploring a work of art: careful observation, analysis, research, interpretation, and critique.

Attributed to the Berlin Painter
Panathenaic amphora
About 480–470 B.C.E.
Earthenware

How to use this resource:

- Print out this document for yourself.
- Read through it carefully as you look at the image of the work of art.
- When you are ready to engage your class, project the image of the work of art on a screen in your classroom using an LCD projector. Use the questions provided below to lead the discussion.

There is no substitute for seeing the real thing!
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 and programs for adults, teens, and families are available.
Visit the museum's Web site to learn more.
Step 1. Close Observation
Ask students to **look carefully** at this work of art and **describe** everything they see. Start with broad, open-ended questions like these:

*What do you notice when you look at this pot?*
*What else do you see?*

Become more and more specific as you guide your students’ eyes around the work, with questions such as:

*Describe the pot’s shape.*
*Where are its handles?*
*Where is the pot wide? Where is it narrow?*
*Is it symmetrical or asymmetrical?*

*How is the pot decorated?*
*What colors do you see? What patterns?*

*What do you notice about this figure?*
*Its pose? Dress? The objects it is holding and the objects surrounding it?*
Now, look carefully at the back (reverse) of the pot.

What do you notice about the figures on this side of the pot?

Their poses? Dress? The object one of them is holding in his hand?

How do they compare to the figure on the front? In what ways are they the same? In what ways are they different?
Step 2. Preliminary Analysis

Once your students have listed everything they noticed about the pot, begin asking simple analytical questions that will deepen your students’ understanding of the work. For instance:

*What might the figures on the back of the pot be doing? What is the role of the man standing beside the two grappling figures?*

*How are the figures represented? Why might the grappling figures be nude? How has the artist delineated the muscles on their bodies? What do you notice about their faces?*

*Who might the figure on the front (obverse) of the vase be? Is it a male or a female? How is this figure different from the figures on the other side? What does the information the artist provided suggest about the identity of this figure?*

*What might this pot have been used for? What clues can you get from its shape? What clues can you get from its decoration?*

After each response, always ask, “How do you know?” or “How can you tell?” so that students will look to the work of art for visual evidence to support their theories.

Step 3. Research

At the end of this document, you will find some background information on this pot. Read or paraphrase it for your students.

Step 4. Interpretation

Interpretation involves bringing your close observation, preliminary analysis, and any additional information you have gathered about an art object together to try to understand what a work of art means. There are often no absolute right or wrong answers when one is interpreting a work of art, but there are more thoughtful and better informed ones. It is important to challenge your students to defend their interpretations based upon their visual analysis and research.

Some basic interpretation questions for this vase might include the following:

*This vase is over 2 feet tall and would be extremely heavy when filled with olive oil. What does the size, weight, and skill required to make this vase, tell us about the ways in which the ancient Greeks valued athletics?*

*What else does this Greek amphora tell us about life in ancient Greece? (Consider clothing, the arts, and the relationship between ancient Greeks and their gods.)*
5. Critical Assessment and Response
Critical assessment and response involves a judgment about the success of a work of art. It is optional but should always follow the first four stages of the Learning to Look method. Art critics often engage in this further analysis and support their opinions based on careful study of and research about a work of art.

Critical assessment involves questions of value. For instance:

*Do you think this amphora is successful and well done? Why or why not?*

This fifth stage can also encompass one’s **response** to a work of art.

*Do you like this work of art? How does it relate to your life and your culture?*

One’s response can be much more personal and subjective than one’s assessment.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Attributed to the Berlin Painter

Panathenaic amphora

Earthenware, height 24.5 inches
About 480–470 B.C.E.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ray Winfield Smith, Dartmouth Class of 1918

This black-figure amphora,* which is over two feet tall, served as a prize at the Panathenaic games in Athens and is decorated with a representation of Athena, warrior goddess and patron of Athens. Beginning in 566 B.C.E., games were held every four years as part of the great festival, or Panathenaia,* in her honor. Vessels such as this usually contained oil from the olive trees sacred to the goddess.

As on most of these vessels, Athena stands between two Doric columns surmounted by roosters, which may refer to her father, Zeus. As mythology recounts, she was born fully armed from the forehead of Zeus and, on becoming his favorite child, was entrusted with both his aegis (protective cloak) and thunderbolt. Her shield is adorned with the Gorgon’s head, given to her by Perseus, which has the power to turn all who look at it to stone.

Panathenaic amphoras traditionally represent Athena on one side, and on the reverse, the event for which the vase was awarded. It is uncertain if the figures on the reverse of this piece depict wrestlers or pankratists, contenders in a more brutal event that combined both boxing and wrestling. The draped figure to the left is either a trainer or a judge of the games. This amphora is the work of the Berlin Painter, one of the most accomplished vase painters of the period and so named for his magnificent red-figure amphora in the collection of the Berlin Museum.

*amphora: a two-handled jar with a narrow neck used by the ancient Greeks and Romans to carry wine or oil.

*Panathenaia: an all-Athenian festival