Learning to Look Lesson: Pablo Picasso

This resource will allow you to lead your students through careful observation and analysis of a painting by Pablo Picasso.

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.

Pablo Picasso, Spanish, active in France, 1881–1973

Guitar on a Table, 1912
Oil, sand, and charcoal on canvas
Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, Class of 1930; P.975.79
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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 website 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 see or notice when you look at this painting?
What else do you see?

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

What do you notice about the shapes?

How are they arranged on the canvas?
Are they concentrated in one area or spread evenly throughout the canvas?
Which shapes are geometric? Which seem more organic?
Do the shapes appear flat or three-dimensional?
Which are colored? Which are not?

What do you notice about the colors?

The way in which the colors are applied?

What do you notice about the texture of the painting? Is it smooth like a mirror? Rough? Is the paint thick or thin?

Do other sorts of materials appear to have been used in this work of art?
What do you notice about the lines in this painting?

Are they straight? Curved? Heavy? Thin?

How do they move your eye around the painting?

Overall, how would you describe the look of this painting?

Step 2. Analysis
Once your students have listed everything that they noticed about this painting, begin asking simple analytical questions that will deepen their understanding of the work. For instance:

Do the colors or shapes in this painting remind you of anything? Recognizable objects? A particular place?

Is this painting still or do you get a sense of movement?

What ideas do you think this artist might be trying to communicate with this style of painting?

What did the artist choose NOT to do in this work?

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

Step 3: Research
Now that your students have had a chance to look carefully and begin forming their own ideas about this work of art, feel free to share with them the background information at the end of this document. It provides information you cannot get simply by looking at this painting.

When you have finished sharing the information, consider the following:

Does this information reinforce what you observed and deduced on your own?
Did it mention anything you did not see or think about previously? If so, what?

How would your experience of this painting have been different if you read the background information first?

**Step 4. Interpretation**
Interpretation involves bringing your careful observation, 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 painting might include:

* How does this painting break with tradition? In what ways is it like a “realistic” still-life? In what ways is it different?

* Why might Picasso have wanted to break with tradition? How might the increasing use of photography have affected him and other painters of his time?

* Picasso changed the evolution of Western art forever with works like this. How might this painting have inspired other artists to approach their work?

**Step 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 the work of art.

Critical assessment involves questions of value. For instance:

* Do you think this painting 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? Does it move you?

* Are the ideas in this image still relevant today?

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

Pablo Picasso, Spanish, active in France, 1881–1973

_Guitar on a Table_  
1912  
Oil, sand, and charcoal on canvas  
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_Guitar on a Table_, 1912, by Pablo Picasso is an excellent example of the innovations of cubism, a revolutionary artistic movement developed between 1908 and 1914 by Picasso and fellow artist Georges Braque. Before cubism, most artists aspired to the Renaissance ideal that painting should represent an illusionistic image of the three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional surface. Confronted with early-twentieth-century advances in science and technology that fundamentally shifted our understanding of vision and perception, the artists of Picasso’s generation sought new approaches to painting that could make sense of this new, modern world. The cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque challenged older notions about the nature of vision by drawing attention to the flat plane of the canvas, to the paint itself, and presenting subjects from different perspectives and planes at the same time. Most importantly, cubism paved a new path for painting in an age when audiences believed that photography could more faithfully represent “reality” than paint on canvas.

In _Guitar on a Table_, Picasso worked within the format of a traditional still-life painting. The still life arrangement—an assortment of everyday items arranged on a table—was a common subject for artists for centuries. For the cubists, the tabletop still life allowed for extended observation on the same subject, and they often portrayed the same arrangement viewed from various angles and perspectives within the same painting. Here, Picasso dissected his subject (a guitar on a table) into elemental textures, colors, volumes, and geometric planes. Familiar pieces of the guitar—its hourglass contours, sound hole, strings, fretboard, bridge, even the wood grain of the interior—are seen only in fragmented glimpses, as though the instrument has been cut apart and reassembled.

In 1912, both Picasso and Braque were experimenting with a method of art-making called _papier collé_, or collage. In these works, the artists often combined charcoal or pencil drawing with collaged elements, such as newspaper or patterned and textured paper. Although this painting may have predated Picasso’s first true collage by a few months, several of his earlier paintings incorporated collaged elements, such as segments of sheet music and printed wallpaper. _Guitar on a Table_ is entirely painted, but Picasso imitated in paint the effect of industrially produced paper with a fake wood-grain pattern, a material that would frequently appear in Braque’s and his own collages of this period. Collage allowed for the artist to think through the implications of flattening the volumes of a three-dimensional object—the guitar—into a single plane, at times making it indistinguishable from the surface of the tabletop supporting it.
The tabletop and guitar were frequent subjects of cubism, often employed by Picasso, Braque, and their followers to evoke the sights and sounds of a café, an important place for artists to gather and share new ideas. Picasso himself did not play an instrument and was not interested in most forms of classical music. He did, however, have a fondness for guitars, which were popular, non-classical instruments closely associated in his time with café life and flamenco music, and connected specifically to his own Spanish culture. While the form and structure of a guitar, with its combination of curved and straight lines, volumes, and textures, was a perfect subject for cubist painting, it also likely held personal meaning for Picasso, referring to his own identity as an expatriate Spaniard living in Paris.