

## Focus & Frame

*A process for thinking in creative and civically-relevant ways through art*

Pick an artwork and look together using these following steps.



**Observe:** Silently notice



**Share and Listen:** Share what you notice and listen to others' observations



**Put together the clues:** What might be going on here, and what makes you say so?



**Consider through a lens:** a lens is a way to look at something differently. These questions can help reveal new and different ways of thinking with the artwork. Choose one lens (Interconnectedness, Investigation, Imagination, or Influence) and consider the listed questions.



**Interconnectedness:** How does this artwork connect to you? To your family? To your neighborhood? What do you see that is familiar to you or that you have seen before?



**Investigation:** What is a mystery that you see in this artwork? Who, besides the artist, do you think would have something interesting to add to our conversation, and why?



**Imagination:** What is something you could add, subtract, or change to make the story more fair, healthy, or beautiful for the creatures in this world? What similar ideas did you hear from your classmates? What surprising ideas did you hear?



**Influence:** Which person, creature or thing in this artwork do you think is powerful (or powerless)? What makes you say that? What power acts on that person/creature/thing?

### Tips for Use

**Notice deeply** Allow plenty of time for students to share what they notice, and return to noticing if interpretations are narrow or disconnected with what is visible in the art. Explain to students that this is a special way to look, and that it may feel unusual because it needs practice.

**Encourage many perspectives** Before you get started, ensure that you do not have one specific interpretation or message you want to drive the students toward. Be excited by surprising responses and ask “what makes you say that” of all theories. It is very important that all possible interpretations are welcomed so long as they can be supported by evidence in the artwork and/or connections to their own experiences.

**Notice & Name** Look for moments along the way to point out how we see things through our own experience. For instance, you might say “you are looking at the outfits and they remind you of clothing you’ve seen on a television show and that is giving you a clue about the time period this might depict.” Relatedly, if students say something that is incongruent with the time or place of the artwork, you might say “for our point of view in this time and place, this looks like a cellphone. What if I told you that this artwork was made before those were invented?”

### Extensions & Variations

- Revisit the same work of art multiple times, being sure to take time to observe and share each time. What do you/ the students notice the second (third, fourth, etc.) times that you didn’t see before?
- Make the “Lens” questions your own by following the organic flow of the conversation, choosing whichever question (or questions) fit the conversation.
- Alternately, decide in advance which lens you’d like to use. Explain to students that a lens is a special way to look, and that it may feel unusual because it needs practice. The important thing is to know what kind of thinking you want to spark and to use these questions as suggestions.
- Use the same process with something else – a picture from a newspaper or magazine, an object of wonder or even student work.
- See the Tips for Creative & Civic Capacities resources for more tips; find sample artworks from the Columbus Museum of Art in the appendix

### How does this tool Cultivate Creative & Civic Capacities (C4)?

C4 involves slowing down and engaging both imaginative and critical thinking in the face of ambiguity. This routine supports students to build creatively- and civically relevant habits, such as slowing down, observing beyond initial impressions, listening, co-creating multiple interpretations and reasoning with evidence. Art can also be a way of considering C4 Interconnectedness. Artworks – including those very familiar to students, like fashion and music – reflect both the individual vision of the artist and the cultural and social influences of the artist’s context; so, too, does our response to art reflect by individuality and group membership.

## Tips for Creative & Civic Capacities through art

When done well and regularly, discussing art can build key C4 capacities, such as reasoning with evidence; considering different perspectives, times and places; embracing ambiguity, wondering about possibilities, and more. Like all forms of teaching, inquiry with art improves with practice – both on the student side and on the teacher side.

Here are some suggestions to support C4 thinking with art:

### **General tips for observation-based thinking with art**

- **Slow down and notice.** People are eager to say what they think. Before they develop or share interpretations, have students share many observations. You might try directing students to
  - Set a timer and have everyone look in silence for 2 full minutes.
  - Zoom their attention in on one quadrant at a time.
  - List 5 things they see, and then 5 more.
  - Go in a circle having each person name just one thing they notice.
  - Look for something they think no one else has seen.
- **Back up interpretations** When students say things like “this is about...” or “the story is...” ask them **what they see that makes them say that**. When inviting interpretation, you can
  - Mirror back what students say.
  - Use your mirroring to draw students’ attention to their thinking, noting the moments when they might be relying on past experiences rather than just what they see. *Ex: “They’re in a church (what makes you say that?) because it has crosses and pews like a church” you could say “You recognize things in this scene that remind you of certain kinds of churches that you’ve seen before, maybe in person or in movies.”*
- **Return to noticing** if interpretations seem disconnected from what is apparent in the work.
- **Complexify interpretations** “Who can think of a different story that might be going on?” is a helpful way to nudge students to consider multiple interpretations.

### **Advice for selecting an artwork:**

- **Try the tools with art of any subject matter.** Many C4-supportive thinking capacities can be built by using these steps with an artwork that does not overtly address a social issue. Particularly if you or your students are new to discussing art and/or civic issues, it can be helpful to start with art that is colorful, joyful or otherwise engaging to your particular group of learners.
- **Look to other times and places.** It may be easier to discuss a charged theme using a work from a different time or place which raises the same big idea.
- **“Play the movie.”** When selecting art, try to envision what your students might notice and interpret. Select a work you think contains enough ambiguity that students are likely to draw different interpretations of the same scene.
- **Remember that artists have their own frames.** Artists are people, like viewers. And, like us, artists are both unique individuals and part of the societies in which they lived. Remind students that artist intent is only one piece of what we can think about with art, and that artists have biases like anyone. Encourage students to complexify and/or challenge the messages they think the artwork presents.

- **Select works from, and of, a range of cultures and identities.** To present students with a more thorough view of human creativity, you will have to look beyond the best-known names. This is because the history of art training, display, and preservation has made it harder for women artists, artists of color, and artists outside of the global West to achieve notoriety.
- **For recommended sample artworks from the collection of the Columbus Museum of Art, see the Image Bank for Cultivating Creative & Civic Capacities.**

### *Prepare for the Unexpected*

- **Try to imagine non-factual interpretations.** Decide in advance whether your priority is to foster wild imagination (including ideas out of sync with what the artist intended or belonging to a different time or place) or analysis using visual details and outside information to arrive at an interpretation that fits with what historians would say about the artwork. Either way, prepare to ask “what makes you say that,” and affirm what is valuable about students’ ideas (e.g. “you see this shape and it reminds you of your phone”). If it makes sense to, pivot with phrases like
  - “Is there anything else we see that doesn’t fit with that?”
  - “What if I told you (e.g. this was painted long before that was invented)?”
- **Know that you can hit “pause” if needed.** If students are getting heated in sharing their opinions, are sharing opinions that might be unintentionally harmful to others or seem totally lost, it is okay to ‘pause’ the conversation. You could say something like
  - “Let’s pause this conversation for now...after we do a bit more research, we can come back to it.”
- **Listen for, and challenge, stereotypes and bias.** Try to name the bias you think is shaping the comment and highlight the fact that social messaging (as well as personal experience) influences our interpretations. Use language that avoids shame, such as “it sounds like this work is reminding you of the negative and untrue stereotype that...”
- **Revisit conversations.** If there is something that excites student imagination, revisit it as a creative prompt. If there was something that didn’t sit right with you or others, devise a way to revisit that moment for a healing or complexifying conversation.

# Image Bank for Cultivating Creative & Civic Capacities

## How to use this resource:

This resource presents works of art from the collection of the Columbus Museum of Art.

These works have been selected by CMA educators for their adaptability to a wide range developmental levels and prior experience discussing art and/or civic topics. These images are especially appropriate for teachers with no extra training in teaching with artworks.

Use these works as springboards for discussion by beginning with observation, discussing many possibilities, and reasoning with evidence. Emphasize that there are no wrong answers, but that students should back up their claims.

For ideas on how to have conversations with and through art, see the *Focus & Frame* tool from Cultivating Creative & Civic Capacities.

These works may be used for educational purposes only. For any usage outside of your teaching practice, see the last page for conditions of publication.

## Information key:

Alongside the artwork is some identifying information about the artwork. It is your choice whether and how you might share this information with students.

Here is the meaning of that information



Rockwell Kent,  
*Mad and Bird*, c. 1918  
Oil on Glass  
Gift of Ferdinand Howald  
1931.188

- Artist's Name
- *Title of the Artwork*, year of creation
- Medium (materials that the artwork is made of)
- Information about how the object entered the museum collection
- Accession number (unique identification number used by the museum for tracking and organization)



Francesca Woodman  
*McDowell Colony 1979-1980*  
Gelatin silver print  
Gift of Charlotte Hawke,  
Denver  
2005.009.002



Faith Ringgold  
*Tar Beach #2*  
 1990-92  
 Screen print on silk  
 Museum Purchase with funds  
 donated from the first annual  
 Celebrating Diversity in Art  
 Event  
 2001.021



George Tooker  
*Cornice*, c. 1949  
Tempera on panel  
Museum Purchase, Howald  
Fund II  
1980.026





Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson,  
*To Be a Drum [Daddy Wes, Mat,  
and Martha Lying in the Grass]*,  
1998  
Gift of the Artist  
2002.016.002n



Barkley Hendricks  
*Doc and Ruby's Oldest Boy*, 1979  
Acrylic on canvas  
72 x 48 in. (182.88 x 121.92 cm)  
Museum Purchase, Derby Fund, from the Philip J. and  
Suzanne Schiller Collection of American Social Commentary  
Art, 1930–1970  
2005.012.028



Thomas Hart Benton  
*Strike* 1933  
Lithograph  
Museum Purchase, Derby  
Fund, from the Philip J. and  
Suzanne Schiller Collection of  
American Social Commentary  
Art, 1930-1970  
2005.013.035



Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson

*Sidewalks of Poindexter Village: Market Street*, 1999

Paint on muslin

Estate of Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, Columbus Museum  
of Art, Ohio, Courtesy of Hammond Harkins Galleries

T Aminah.2016.020



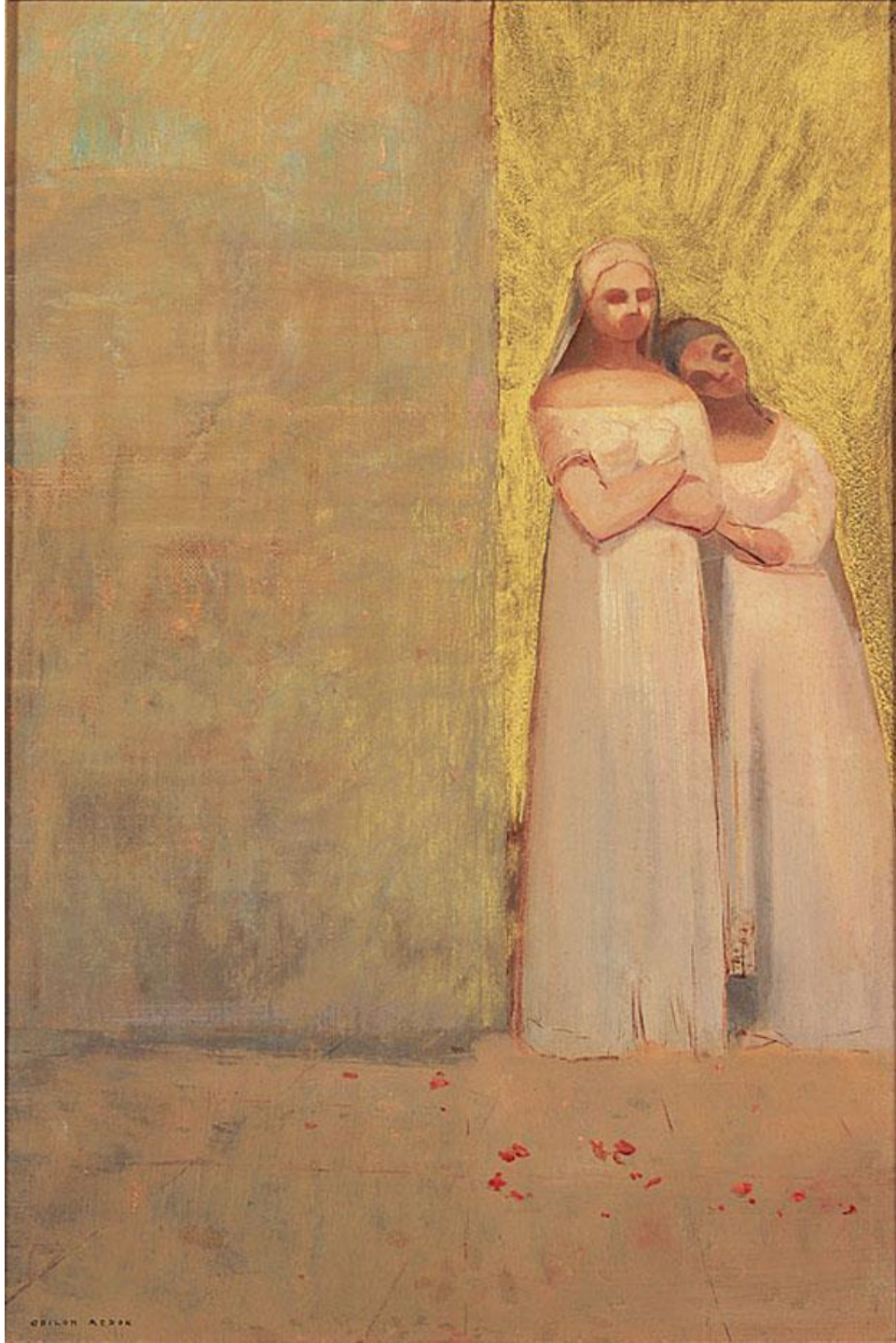
Romare Howard Bearden  
*La Primavera* 1967  
Collage and painting on  
board  
Museum Purchase, Derby  
Fund, from the Philip J. and  
Suzanne Schiller Collection of  
American Social Commentary  
Art, 1930-1970  
2005.012.007



Gustave Courbet  
*Marine*, c. 1860  
Oil on canvas  
Gift of Ferdinand Howald  
1931.049



Carstian Luyckx  
*Still Life*, c. 1660  
Oil on canvas  
Museum Purchase, Derby  
Fund  
1961.003



Odilon Redon  
*The Two Graces*, c. 1900  
Oil on canvas  
Gift of Howard D. and Babette L.  
Sirak, the Donors to the Campaign  
for Enduring Excellence, and the  
Derby Fund  
1991.001.054





Rockwell Kent,  
*Maid and Bird*, c. 1918  
Oil on Glass  
Gift of Ferdinand Howald  
1931.188



Clarence Holbrook Carter  
*Jane Reed and Dora  
Hunt*, 1941  
Oil on canvas  
Museum Purchase, Derby  
Fund  
2014.023



Barbara Watler  
*A Long Way Home* 2009  
Fabric, prefabricated plastic  
dolls, and recycled metal keys  
Gift of the Artist  
2009.038



Benny Andrews

*The Watchers*, 1969

Museum Purchase, Derby Fund, from the Philip J.  
and Suzanne Schiller Collection of American Social  
Commentary Art, 1930–1970

2005.012.005



Baseera Khan  
*I Arrive in a Place with a High Level of  
Psychic Distress (Pink)*, 2021  
Framed C-prints, laser-cut acrylic, and  
maple wood spacers  
Museum Purchase with funds provided by  
The Contemporaries  
2021.015



Marion Post Wolcott  
*Men and Women Fishing in Creek  
near Cotton Plantations outside  
Belzoni, Miss Delta*  
October 1939  
Dye transfer print  
Gift of Martin and Lynn Halbfinger  
2016.019.021



Ronald Trujillo  
*Shelter*, 1989  
Color etching  
Gift of Aminah Robinson in  
memory of Robert  
Hamilton Blackburn, 1920-  
2003  
2003.028.012

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