

### Key Ideas

- Children can describe the visual qualities and interpret the meanings of works of art.
- Artists and art experts are good models for describing and interpreting works of art.
- A work of art can be interpreted in several different ways.
- Historical or cultural knowledge can enhance one's interpretation of a work of art.

### Program Summary

An intriguing poster that Jessica received leads Don to take THE BIG A children to the Seattle Art Museum to learn the meaning of the mask in the poster. At the museum, the children are curious about the meanings of various works of art. Don suggests that they look closely at each work and describe its parts. Their enthusiasm grows as the children discover that they can identify the elements of design and how the elements are composed. The children act out a painting by Jacob Lawrence, and the artist offers insight into its meaning. Don encourages the children not to be afraid to guess about meanings, and the children show tolerance for each other's ideas.

The children's ability to form their own interpretations increases as they meet photographer Lucy Capehart at the museum and discuss with her the possible meanings of her work. The African mask in Jessica's poster is on exhibit at the museum, and the children's understanding of the mask is enhanced as West African artist Won Ldy Paye and curator Leasa Farrar-Fraser talk about African culture.

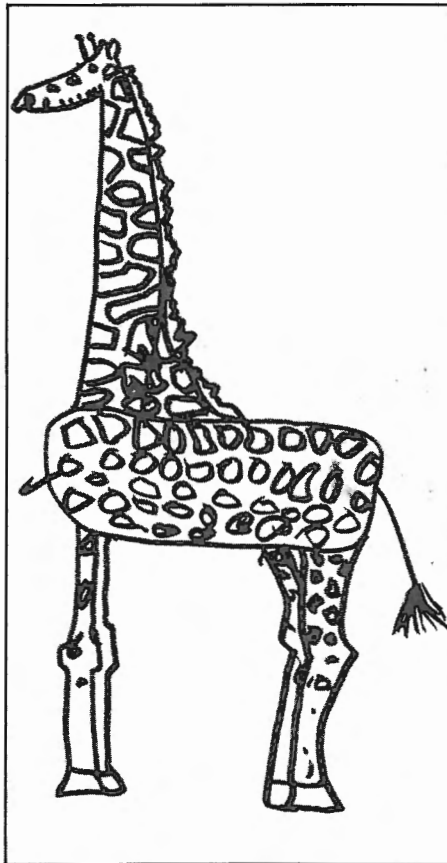
### Key Words

**describing**—pointing out the separate parts of a work of art.

**analyzing**—pointing out the ways that the parts of the artwork go together.

**interpreting**—learning the meaning (or meanings) in a work of art; understanding and seeing the relationship between the subject and the artist's use of visual elements. This can be done by speculating on different interpretations, tolerating and respecting others' interpretations, building on others' interpretations, using body language to sense meanings, and using expressive language.

**museum**



### Featured Artwork

*Daybreak—A Time to Rest*; Jacob Lawrence; National Gallery of Art, Washington; Gift of an Anonymous Donor (Date: dated [19]67; Tempera on hardboard; 30" x 24" (0.762 x 0.610 cm.))

*Seated Courtesan*; Tsukimaro Kitagawa; act. 1801-29; Japanese, Edo period, c.1810, Ukiyo-e School; Mounted as a Kakemono, in color on silk; 16 1/8" x 25 7/8"; Seattle Art Museum; Gift of Miss Cora Clem; 63.50

*The Duet*; probably before 1650; Jan Mieuze Molenaer; Dutch, c.1610-1663; Oil on canvas; H: 26 1/8" (66.4 cm.) W: 20 1/2" (52.1 cm.); Seattle Art Museum; Kress Collection; 61.162

Blanket; African, Mali; Cotton, strip-weave; L: 94 7/8" (241 cm.) W: 60 1/2" (153.6 cm.); Seattle Art Museum, Katherine White Collection; 81.17.74

*Working Class Woman with Sleeping Boy*; c. 1927; Kathe Kollwitz; German, 20th century; Lithograph; H: 15 5/16" (39 cm.) W: 13" (33 cm.); Seattle Art Museum; Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection; 44.97

*Study for the Munich Olympic Games Poster*; 1972; Jacob Lawrence; American, b. 1917; Gouache; 35 1/2" x 27"; Seattle Art Museum; Purchased with funds from PONCHO; 79.31

Game board; African, Liberia, Ivory Coast; Dan; Wood, metal; H: 5 3/4" (14.5 cm.) W: 32 3/8" (82.2 cm.) D: 5 3/4" (14.5 cm.); Seattle Art Museum; Katherine White Collection; 81.17.205

Mask (*Ga Wree Wree*), 20th century; African, Liberia; Dan; Wood, teeth, metal, cowrie shells, bells, beads, fiber, netting, fabric; H: 19 1/2" (49.5 cm.) W: 12 1/2" (31.8 cm.) D: 11" (28 cm.); Seattle Art Museum; Katherine White Collection; 81.17.197a,b

*New York City, 1984*; Lucy Capehart; Ektacolor photograph; 30" x 40"

*Pink-Gold Macchia with Zinc-Yellow Lip Wrap*; Dale Chihuly; 1986; Blown glass; Approx. H: 18" x W: 16" x D: 16"

*Dancer*; Margaret Ford; 1985; Clay and wood; H: 17" x W: 11 3/4" x D: 11 3/4"; Foster/White Gallery

Mask; Mexican Artist, unknown; Dated: 20th century; Leather; Approx. H: 10" x W: 7" x D: 6"; La Tienda Folk Art Gallery

## Before the Program

Show your class one or several works of art by different artists. Ask the students: "what do you think they mean?" "What do they say to you?" "What is the artist saying?" Accept all responses.

Tell your students that people often try to explain the meanings of works of art, and that this program will show how THE BIG A children learned to "figure out" the meanings of different works of art.

## After the Program

### Recall the Program

What did THE BIG A children learn at the art museum? (For example, they learned that describing the parts of a work of art and how they fit together will lead to an understanding about what it means. Also, it sometimes helps to know about the people who made the artwork.)

### Discuss Ideas for Creating Art

Explain that instead of creating art after this program, the students will practice responding to works of art.

### Respond to Art

One way for students to figure out the meaning of the works of art is to take part in three connected activities. They can begin with one work of art and *describe* the various parts. The next activity involves *analyzing* the ways the parts relate to one another. The final activity is *interpreting* the meaning of the work of art. Each activity is explained in more detail below:

#### Describing Activity

- Display several works of art made by students or artists. (See the art reproductions in THE BIG A Teacher's Art Kit.) Select one of the works of art on display and ask the class to look at it carefully. Begin by asking, "What do you see in this work of art?" Challenge them to describe everything that is there. Write their responses on the chalkboard. (For example, flat shapes, light colors, group of people, five faces, streaks of paint.)

Encourage them to respond to the subject matter and also to the design elements and the characteristics of the medium used by the artist. Vocabulary learned in previous programs should be used in this activity.

#### Analyzing Activity

- Using the same work of art, help the students analyze the ways that the parts relate to one another or fit together. (For example, "The light-colored shapes overlap the dark shapes." "The same green color is repeated at the top and bottom." "The rough texture on the right balances the texture on the other side of the painting.") Encourage students to use vocabulary learned in previous programs, such as *variety*, *repetition*, *balance* and *focal point*. Add these words to their descriptions on the board.

#### Interpreting Activity

- Invite the students to speculate freely on possible interpretations of the artwork, using some of the words from the previous two activities. Encourage them to focus on the artwork's expressive qualities, using qualitative words such as *loud* colors, *scary* eyes, *smooth* shapes and *exciting* action.

Prompt the students' interpretations by asking them to complete introductory phrases such as the following: "The artist is trying to say . . ." or "To me the painting is saying . . ." Students can use metaphors and analogies if given prompts such as: "The sculpture is like . . ." (For example, "The collage reminds me of a *peaceful* and *gentle* summer day. The shapes of the trees and buildings are *soft* and *fuzzy* like a *giant*, *stuffy* bed. The colors are *pale* and *gentle*, too. That's why I think the artist is saying that summertime is nice, because it is *relaxed* and *safe* from *scary* things.")

In addition to the above formal activities, you can lead students to interpretations with informal, game-like activities. Some possibilities are suggested below:

- Match artwork to words: Give each student about ten small slips of paper, each with a different qualitative word. (For example, gentle, quiet, loud, angry and lazy.) Challenge them to match the words with the overall qualities they see in three works of art on display. Each word may be considered a mini-interpretation of the work of art with which it is matched. Ask students to explain their matched pairs. Encourage them to add other qualitative words to form more complete interpretations.
- Play "I Spy": Have each student create a "telescope" by rolling a sheet of paper into a tube about 1" in diameter. Select one student to look through his/her telescope at a small section of one work of art. Ask the student to describe the section well enough for others to be able to say "I Spy" and point to the correct section. Encourage the class to build on this description by analyzing relationships to other parts of the artwork. This will lead to interpretations of the artwork's meaning.

- Visit an art museum: Arrange for the museum education staff to explain to your class what certain works of art meant to the cultures in which they were made.
- Look at art in your surroundings such as advertisements in magazines, billboards or product packaging such as cereal boxes, soap boxes or pop cans. (See the reproduction of James Crespinel's billboard in THE BIG A Teacher's Art Kit.) Ask a commercial artist to visit your class and explain how he/she intended the public to react to his/her work.



Photograph: Joseph Freeman