

VTS: *Visual Thinking Strategies*

Guide to Museum Visits

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The VTS is based on the premise that a personal connection to art is the essential first step in building a long-term relationship to it. VTS discussions are the means of developing a rapport with, interest in, and curiosity about art. They are structured to benefit the early stages of aesthetic development, laying a foundation for later growth.

It seems important to mention this as you plan your museum visit because museums often convey the attitude that having a large body of information is the only way of knowing about art. They sometimes make new or infrequent visitors feel as if their personal responses are unwelcome. It is even possible to feel that discussion is discouraged.

Please try not to let any unspoken assumption stop you from enjoying the discussions that you and your students know how to have. Lively exchange based on extended observation is a highly desirable behavior, even among experts. Though the VTS is designed for beginners, its key emphases—looking carefully and reflecting—are also the central behaviors of the most expert viewers. These viewers know that having information is just one form of knowing. What you are doing with your students engages them at their current stage of development, asking them to draw from their own experiences and knowledge, while teaching them skills they will continue to use as their expertise grows.

Preparations for the Teacher

This museum visit might be the first time that you have taught in a museum. As with any new situation, you may feel nervous. The best way to insure a positive experience for you and your students is to prepare yourself fully.

Here are some ground rules, some of which are further elaborated on in this chapter:

- Contact the museum education personnel to enlist their help.
- Visit the museum to see what is on display, and to select four to five works that you think will engage your students.

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Lay out a reasonable path from where you enter as a group to the art you want to see, and back again.

- Consult with the museum staff regarding any procedures required. Make sure you have an appointment; know where, when and how to arrive and depart; what size group is allowed; and what supervision is required.
- Make lunch arrangements if necessary. Locate coatrooms and bathrooms.
- Ask any questions that occur to you, no matter how simple they may seem.
- Make whatever arrangements are required on the part of your school: buses; permission slips; class coverage, etc.

Regarding the choices of art: Select pictures that are similar to ones that produced good discussions in your classroom. If there are works of art from your museum that you viewed as slides in class, include one of these. Students will enjoy rediscovering it, and they can learn the difference between viewing the slide and the original. Keep in mind that the images need to be physically accessible, allowing a group to assemble so that all students have a good view. Scale is an issue here. Pictures should be neither so big, nor so little, that they cannot be easily seen. Remember to check for glare from lights or from glass that may cover the image; you may need to squat to check this, given the difference in your height and theirs.

Regarding the timing: We recommend that you stay in the galleries for no more than an hour, limiting yourself to four or five works to give you time to have discussions comparable to those in the classroom: 12-15 minutes apiece. This timeframe is recommended because the experience is intense and is best stopped before it becomes either overwhelming or tiring. (If you feel that the recommended time is too short given the rare and rich opportunity, extend the stay. It might be better, however, to brainstorm ways students can return, perhaps with their families.)

It is a good idea to plan for one or two more images than you expect to use in case a gallery is closed at the last minute, or a particular image you planned to use has been removed for some reason, or is in use by another group.

Plan enough time for the visit overall. If you need up to sixty minutes in the galleries, calculate additional time for bathroom visits and other logistics. Expect that you will need a total of two hours from beginning to end. Add more time to eat, if that is an option.

Regarding the museum staff: Ask the museum staff to help you map out a route that will not only get you where you want to go without wasting time, but also introduce the students to the museum in general.

If the class you are teaching is especially large or especially young, you may want to break the group into two. You might enlist the aid of museum staff to work with one half of the group while the other remains with you. Working with a smaller number of students in this new setting often helps both you and the students feel more secure about dealing with unexpected circumstances, which naturally arise. Make sure in this case that the museum staff person is thoroughly familiar with the VTS method.

See if there is any information about the museum and its programs that you can take back to class or give students to take home.

Regarding the school administration: Make sure that your school administrators understand the importance of the museum visit. Ask for their support, particularly in communications with parents and other teachers. This is especially important if special arrangements need to be made with other teachers to cover any of your normal responsibilities, or if you need help making travel arrangements.

If the museum charges an entry fee and students in your class are from families for whom this is a problem, you may need to seek the assistance of your school or museum administrator to make special arrangements to have this fee waived.

Be sure to follow all of your school's procedures for conducting a field trip.

Preparations for the Students

Introduce the museum in advance of the visit so that students have a sense of where they are going and what they will find there. Ask them for any recollections they have of past museum visits, and make sure they are clear about the kind of museum you are visiting. Students often confuse one museum with others. Share some of your experience from this museum and from others.

Since one important objective of this lesson is to insure that the students feel comfortable in the museum, explain the "museum rules" to them in advance:

- Not touching the art keeps it clean and safe for future visitors. There is invisible dirt and harmful oils on our fingers.
- Not running and not walking backwards in the museum decreases the likelihood of accidentally bumping into something. Being quiet in the galleries allows other visitors to look, think, and talk.
- There may be other rules pertaining to your museum. Guards will be on hand to help students remember them. If possible, ask the guard to introduce him- or herself to establish a rapport with students.
- Suggest that students dress so they can sit on the floor. It is strongly encouraged that you "sit them" so that they can all easily see the picture being discussed as well as hear one another. This also helps them stay focused—not such an easy thing to do in this new environment full of interesting distractions.

Preparations for the Chaperones

The museum visit offers your community an opportunity to broaden understanding of the goals of the VTS by inviting parents, grandparents, other teachers or school administrators who may be curious about the VTS lessons to chaperone. These chaperones should be prepared for their role.

The VTS teacher should meet with prospective chaperones or otherwise explain to them what the VTS is. They may have a different expectation of the museum visit. Describe the museum visit as an essential part of a process of learning about art and ask them to not only serve as monitors of student behavior, but also as active observers. While you do not want them to participate in the discussions, you can suggest that they listen closely to the questions asked and silently follow the looking/thinking process as students make discoveries. Ask them to think about the ways students are learning to cooperatively construct meaning from the art that they discuss. Tell them that you will ask for their comments at the end of the museum visit, and remember to do this. Include their comments in your journal.

Preparations for the Museum Staff

It is important for the museum staff to be aware of the VTS method because in some ways it differs from traditional museum teaching. One of the biggest differences is that the classroom teacher continues to teach in the museum. Another is that the VTS precludes the giving of information that has not been requested. If you are working in partnership with a museum, it is likely that these and other issues will already have been addressed. If not, please show them this manual as an initial step in arranging for a visit that allows you to continue working by the same method that the students have learned in class.

If museum personnel do understand the VTS, you can enlist their aid in planning your visit, helping you to select works of art to view, or to break your class into two groups for easier viewing.

You might also invite museum teachers to attend one of your in-class lessons, to introduce themselves to students. This way they can also see the students at work on their home turf, and they can even be invited to teach one slide to further their acquaintance. It is useful for the students to think they have a friend at the museum.

Using Labels

Students may pick up on the presence of labels, a tool that is important in the long run to learn to use. However, once discovered, students may think they can use labels as a short cut to understanding the image. If they find a title or explanation which they think “explains” the picture, they treat the information as if it were just another opinion. Ask students to examine the picture in light of what they have read: “What do you see that supports that comment?”

Here is what the standard identification label contains:

Name of the artist.

Birth and, if applicable, death dates.

Nationality. Usually the country of the artist's birth. In the case of artists who were born in one place but lived most of their productive life in another, the “adoptive” country may be given.

Title of work. Titles are usually given by the artist. Sometimes they are merely descriptions of the work, for example, "Still Life;" sometimes they identify the subject: "Street, Dresden" or "Fish." At other times, titles are a key to what the artist might have wanted us to think or see: "One" or "The Persistence of Memory," although such titles can still be cryptic. When "Untitled" is used, it usually represents the artist's wish to provide no additional remarks.

Accession information. This data is provided by the museum to indicate the manner in which the work came into the collection. It is a way of acknowledging donors. There are sometimes name and number codes given to show how the object is recorded in museum records, and when it was acquired by the museum.

Medium. Usually this is a list of the materials and/or technique that the artist used in creating a work. "Oil on canvas", "watercolor on paper", "lithography", etc., are common examples of materials and techniques used in works of art. "Mixed media" indicates a number of different materials used to create a work of art.

Some works come with additional explanatory labels. The information and ideas they contain are what the museum staff wants people to know about the art. Some labels provide background not visible in the picture and use vocabulary that is often the specialized language of art history. If students want to debate the opinions given in the labels or look for evidence of what is said, let them. Just make sure these additional labels do not intimidate. They are there as thoughts, not truths.