

Self-Guided Resource: Grades 9–12



How To Use This Resource:

This resource will help you guide 9–12 students on an hour-long visit to the permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, for groups of up to 75. Each stop includes four parts.

Part 1: Art History

Before your tour, read about the works of art.

Part 2: Tour Tips

Because the Museum is often crowded and works of art may be off view, the back-up objects and tour tips will help you improvise along the way. The questions in this guide can be applied to nearly all works of art in the collection. Talk about what students are interested in, and encourage them to articulate and discuss their ideas, even if you do not have any art history information about an object.

Part 3: Questions

When you arrive at a new work of art, encourage students to spend a few minutes to look closely, ask questions, and think about what they see. Then, facilitate observation and discussion using these questions as your guide, sharing the art history from **Part 1** when relevant.

Part 4: Transitions

These transitions will guide the conversation from one object to the next, highlighting connections between artwork, collections, and ideas. The transitions are flexible, allowing the groups from your school to visit the objects in any order.

Helpful Tips

- Before you visit, review How to Prepare for Your Visit attached to your confirmation email to learn about drop-off, pick-up, and check-in procedures, Museum policies, and more.
- Check the online collection module before you visit to confirm the works on view.
- Before you enter the galleries, split into groups of approximately 10–15 students and one chaperone. A chaperone must be with every group of students at all times.
- Please limit to one group per gallery, when possible.

Looking for more information, or tips on how to make the most of your visit?

Visit the Museum's Learning Through Art online curriculum (mfah.org/ltta) with teaching videos and lessons, and the self-guided resources page (mfah.org/selfguided) for more in-gallery activities!

Art History Background

An unsteady heap of glistening fish dominates the center of this painting in an unstable and unnerving arrangement of bodies. One of Spain's greatest artists, Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) is famous for documenting the dark underside of a country ravaged by conflict. This painting was created during a time of great political and personal upheaval in the artist's life.

Goya's dramatic circular brushstrokes, consisting of jarring yellow paint outlined in deep red, give the eyes of the fish a pulsing, bulging quality, a hint of their very recent life. Yet Goya rendered the fish with great poignancy, symbolically linking their demise with the terrible human slaughter that resulted from Spain's conflict with France.

Questions

- What words would you use to describe the fish? Consider the artist's choice of color and technique.
- Describe the shapes and arrangement of the fish in this painting. Do you think you would find this arrangement of fish in nature?
- The artist had great skill and originality in his application of paint. How did he use paint to convey feelings of death, isolation, and vulnerability?
- Consider the placement of the fish by the ocean. What if they were painted inside the artist's studio like more traditional still lifes?
- When the artist painted this work, Spain was in a brutal war with France. Does knowing this information change the way you understand this painting?



Francisco de Goya, *Still Life with Golden Bream*, 1808–12, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Alice Pratt Brown Museum Fund and the Brown Foundation Accessions Endowment Fund, 94.245.

Tour Tip

Is this work of art off view or occupied? Visit *Saint Christopher Carrying the Christ Child Through a Sinful World* in Gallery 215 by the circle of Hieronymus Bosch and apply similar questions to your conversation.

Transition

Great work looking closely and analyzing the effects of mood; let's apply that same thoughtfulness to the next object.

The Yellow Scale by František Kupka

Art History Background

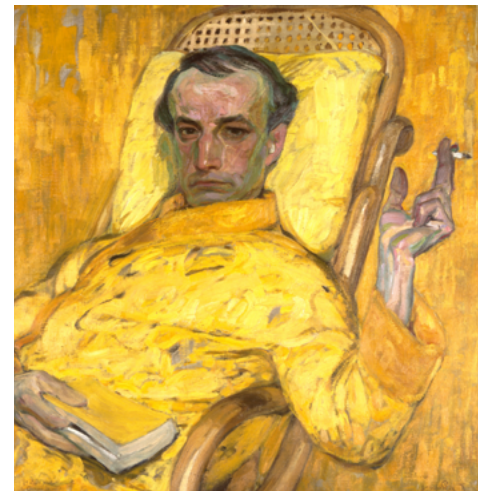
Painted during an intense period of research in optical science and the principles of color theory, František Kupka's (1871–1957) self-portrait plays out the full scale of one color. Loose brushstrokes in a range of the yellow hues suffuse the entire canvas, while staying grounded in a realism that has captured the artist's physical likeness with great originality. His chiseled features—sculpted head and strong nose—are distinguished by greenish tones that evoke an almost sinister quality, while pinks, bright yellows, and greens seem to pulse life up through the tendons and veins of his exposed wrist. Kupka's focus on the expressive qualities of color reflects his belief that art serves a profoundly spiritual, as well as an intellectual and sensual, role in life.

Questions

- What do you notice about this painting? Think about color, texture, form, and expression.
- What words would you use to describe the sitter? How would you describe his posture? His facial expression?
- Consider your own associations with the color yellow. Why do you think the artist included so many different versions of one color? What do you think the artist is expressing to the viewers through his choice?
- This is a self-portrait of the artist. Does knowing this fit into or change your previous interpretation of the portrait?
- What color would you use to say something about yourself? Why?

Transition

We have been talking a lot about the effects of color. Keep those ideas in mind as we move to the next painting.



František Kupka, *The Yellow Scale*, c. 1907, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by Audrey Jones Beck, 94.247. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Tour Tip

Is this work of art off view or occupied? Visit *Self-Portrait* by Suzanne Valadon in Gallery 226 and apply similar questions to your conversation.

Art History Background

Laying pigment down in both thick and thin layers, Hans Hofmann (1880–1966) plays with warm and cool tones in this painting. The warm yellow and orange are built up with *impasto*, a particularly thick or heavy application of paint showing the marks of the brush, palette knife, or other tool. In other areas, red paint is applied thinly, almost exposing the bare canvas underneath. The push and pull dynamics of color oppositions, as seen in much of Hofmann's work, helped lay the groundwork for Color Field painting, in which the monumental horizontal scale engulfs the viewer's field of vision with color(s) extending beyond the canvas. They also point to and embrace the pure color light seen in the installations of James Turrell, which you will walk through on the way to the next building. For Hofmann, color was a way to return to the source of art: nature. "In nature, light creates color. In a picture, color creates light."

Questions

- Take a moment to look at the painting carefully, both closely and from a distance. Consider the color, texture, and composition. What do you notice?
- Consider the way your eye moves throughout the painting. How does Hofmann's composition contribute to a sense of movement?
- What words would you use to describe the texture of the paint on the canvas?
- Does the texture contribute to your overall impression of the painting? Why or why not?
- Consider how color choice affects the tone of the painting. What associations do you have with red? Yellow? Green? Imagine how this painting might be different if the painting consisted of only vibrant colors or if the paint had all been applied with equal thickness.
- Compare the use of color in *Fiat Lux* to Kupka's *Yellow Scale*. How are they similar? How are they different?



Hans Hofmann, *Fiat Lux*, 1963, oil on canvas, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by Mrs. William Stamps Farish, Sr., by exchange, 81.30. © Renate, Hans and Maria Hofmann Trust / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Tour Tip

Is this work of art off view? Visit another painting in Gallery 109 and apply similar questions to your conversation.

Transition

As we move through the building, we will encounter a tunnel that connects the buildings underground. It is also a work of art. Pay close attention as you move through it and be aware of what you notice.

Along the way, students may notice . . .

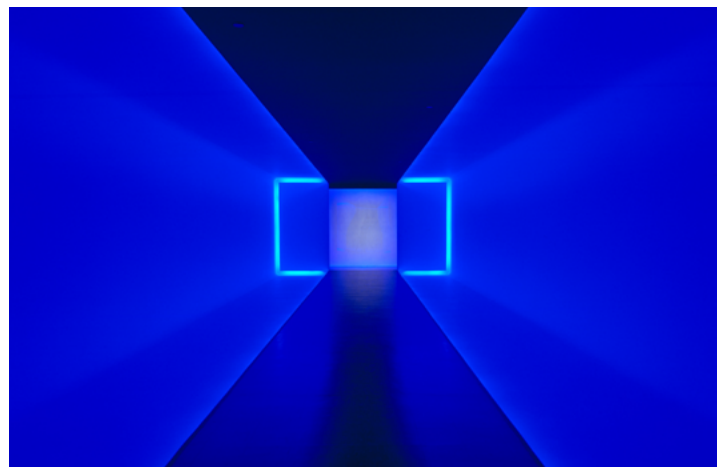
The Light Inside by James Turrell

Art History Background

Throughout his artistic career, James Turrell (born 1943) has focused on light and perception. In *The Light Inside*, concealed sources of neon light periodically change between magenta, cobalt blue, and crimson. Painted with highly reflective white paint, the ceiling, walls, and lowered area on either side of the raised black walkway capture and transmit the light, creating the illusion of boundless illuminated space.

Questions

- What did you notice in the tunnel?
- How does walking through the space change your experience of the work? What if you stood still?
- How does color impact our view of the world?



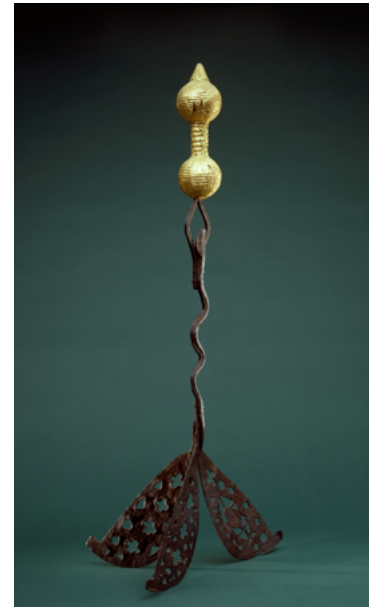
James Turrell, *The Light Inside*, 1999, neon and ambient light, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum commission, funded by Isabel B. and Wallace S. Wilson, 2000.1. © James Turrell

Art History Background

The shaft of this sword features a large undulating snake springing from three blades perforated with geometric patterns and animal forms. Royal regalia associated with the Akan people, such as crowns, clothing, jewelry, footwear, and swords, frequently relay proverbs, have symbolic meaning, and provide a record of the tribe's history. An Akan chief holds a sword when he takes the oath of office. When a chief is seen in public, a sword bearer always accompanies him. Akan royal regalia are considered treasures of the state. The chief safeguards and contributes to the collection during his reign.

Questions

- Describe the handle and the use of materials. What might the use of gold leaf indicate about the sword?
- How does the shape compare with other swords you have seen? What might this be like to hold?
- What are your associations with snakes? Based on those ideas, what might the snake symbolize?
- Let's examine the symbols on the blade. What other details do you notice? How effective would the shape of the sword be in warfare? What does that tell us about the use of the sword?
- An Akan king chooses a special sword to hold the day he takes his oath. We've talked about the shape, the symbols, and the materials in this sword. What might all this communicate to the Akan people?
- What symbols do you use to communicate something about yourself to others?



Akan peoples, *Sword with Three Blades*, 1930–50, iron, wood, gold leaf, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, gift of Alfred C. Glassell, Jr., 971362.

Tour Conclusion

At the end of the tour, ask students to reflect on their visit with any of the following prompts.

- What surprised you about your visit today?
- What are you still wondering about?
- What did you most enjoy about your visit?

Tour Tip

Is this work of art off view or occupied? Visit another Akan sword in Gallery 201 and apply similar questions to your conversation.

Extra time? Take a look outside . . .

Albero folgorato (Thunderstruck Tree) by Giuseppe Penone

Art History Background

This tree's journey to Houston began two years ago in Italy, where Giuseppe Penone (born 1947) conceived and cast the sculpture in bronze from a lightning-struck oak, which he had shipped to his studio, gilding its core to capture the power and drama of a lightning bolt. Born in an agrarian community in the mountains of Italy, Penone became a part of the Arte Povera movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Artists associated with Arte Povera explored a range of unconventional processes and materials to challenge traditional artistic conventions. In *Albero folgorato*, Penone has created a dramatic sculpture with contrasts of positive and negative space, interiors and exteriors, and themes of change over time that suggest a human relationship with nature that is poetic.

Questions

- Walk around this object, looking closely from all sides. Share what you see.
- Do you think this a real tree?
- Based on what you see, what do you think happened to this tree?
- What could it be made out of?
- What do you think about the gold? What associations do you have with gold?



Giuseppe Penone, *Albero folgorato (Thunderstruck Tree)*, 2012, bronze with gold leaf, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, museum purchase funded by the Caroline Wiess Law Accessions Endowment Fund, 2014.728. © 2012 Giuseppe Penone