

# TOUCHING THE ART

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At the Art Institute of Chicago



SELF GUIDED TOUR

# TOUCHING THE ART

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American Art

Find each painting in the gallery (each image is an excerpt from a larger work). As you answer the following questions, keep asking yourself (or your companions): **“How do I know this? What do I see that makes me say this?”** Make sure to answer the questions in order, and when you have finished the questions for each work, turn to the Background Stories section to learn more.

#1



Gallery 161

## READING:

- Is she sleeping? Is she dead?
- What kind of woman is she? An old maid? A popular queen?
- Why did she die so young? From injuries? Was it a violent death?
- What does she hold in her hands? How could they be connected to her death?
- Where is she? Is there anyone around who cares?

## IMMERSION:

- What kind of mood is evoked in this setting? Sunny and active?
- Sounds: Crowds weeping?
- Sensations: Warmth?
- Quote: Imagine someone on shore seeing her pass by. What might they think to themselves?

## SITUATION: (From the perspective of a witness to the scene)

- What makes this scene tragic?

#2



Gallery 161

## READING:

- What is the young boy doing? What is he shooting at? Is he out hunting?
- Who is he with? A stranger? His father? Someone else?
- Has the arrow hit its mark yet? Does the boy think it will? What about the old man?

## IMMERSION:

- Film Clip: Imagine the boy firing the arrow, then the old man leaning in to get a better look. Has the boy changed his position since firing the arrow? When will he move?
- Pose: Take the boy's pose and expression. Feel the excited anticipation?

## SITUATION: (From the boy's perspective)

- Read the background.
- What moment of his “test” is this?

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#3



Gallery 161

## READING:

- What kind of man is this? A cowardly soldier? (Hint: What is around his ankles and elbows?)
- Where is he? In prison?
- Why is his collar ripped open?
- What/who is he staring at? Is he enjoying what he sees?
- Is he resisting?

## IMMERSION:

- Pose: Lift your chin and stand erect. Look down disgustedly. But open your palms at your sides.
- Fill in the scene around him. What kind of people are around? What kinds of sounds? Drums?

## SITUATION:

- What fate is he facing?

#4



Gallery 169

## READING:

- What kind of man is he? A monk? A hunter?
- What happened to her? Is she alive?
- Does he know her? What does she mean to him?
- Who did this to her? (Hint: Is there anyone else around?)

## IMMERSION:

- Film clip: What did he do when he saw her wounded?
- Quote: What could he be thinking to himself as he stares at her?

## SITUATION:

- Reading the background story will be helpful.
- What has he discovered?

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## BACKGROUND STORIES

- #1 **BACKGROUND: *Elaine*.** Elaine was in love with Sir Launcelot. But, already enamored with Queen Guinevere, Launcelot was oblivious to Elaine's feelings for him. She died of heartbreak. At her request, her body was placed in a boat with her final letter in her hand. She was floated down the Thames River to Camelot where she was discovered by King Arthur's court and Launcelot.
- SITUATION:** Witnessing the tragedy of a life of promise cut short.  
**REACTION:** Quiet melancholy. The reaction we are to have is suggested by the mood.  
**CONNECTIONS?** Alfred Tennyson's poem, "The Lady of Shalott" (especially the final stanza). *Braveheart* (Murrin's burial). Your life?
- By Toby Edward Rosenthal in 1874.
- #2 **BACKGROUND: *The Sun Vow*.** In Sioux Indian tribes, a boy had to undergo a rite of passage in order to become a warrior. When he was ready, he would go to the chief and under his close inspection shoot an arrow into the sun. If the arrow disappeared into the brightness of the sun, the boy had passed the test.
- SITUATION:** The chief stares, squinting, into the sun to watch the flight of the arrow during the test. The boy is in the midst of the examination—an important moment in his life. What kinds of "rites of passage" have you been through? (e.g. driver's license test, job interview.)  
**REACTION:** The boy is poised in excited anticipation of his success.  
**CONNECTIONS?** *The Miracle Worker*, *The Karate Kid*. When have you been like either the chief or the boy?
- By Hermon Atkins McNeil in 1901.
- #3 **BACKGROUND: *Nathan Hale*.** Nathan Hale (1755-1776) was a spy for the Continental Army during the American Revolution. He was captured by the British, promptly convicted of treason, and condemned to death by hanging.
- SITUATION:** Nathan Hale is facing the gallows, without possibility of escape. When have you had to face a harsh but unavoidable fate?  
**REACTION:** Rather than submit in fear, he looks upon his enemy with contempt as he accepts his death, not in submission, but as an act of defiance. His last words were, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."  
**CONNECTIONS?** *Braveheart*, *Ninety-Three* by Victor Hugo. Your life?
- By Frederick Macmonnies in 1890.
- #4 **BACKGROUND: *The Death of Procris*.** Procris suspected her husband, Cephalus, of having an affair, because he spent so much time away from home, hunting. She decided to try to find out what he was up to, and one day secretly followed after him. When Cephalus noticed some rustling in the bushes, he thought he'd found some prey and hurled his spear.
- SITUATION:** The young man has just inadvertently killed the person he loves most. When have you realized that you accidentally harmed someone you care for?  
**REACTION:** Sad disbelief. He is still experiencing the shock of what has happened.  
**CONNECTIONS?** *La Traviata*, *Romeo and Juliet*, Google: Myth of Apollo and Hyacinthus. Your life?
- By Benjamin West in 1870.

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#1



Gallery 223a

## READING:

- What is she staring at? An eviction notice?
- What kind of woman is she? Schoolgirl? A mother?
- What kind of note is this? Who could it be from? Her husband?
- What had she been doing? Where was she before she stood up?
- What are the potential personal consequences of picking up the note?
- Is she going to pick it up?

## IMMERSION:

- Pose: Hold your hand up to your chest like she does and look down. Feel the interest and indecision?
- Film Clip: Imagine her sitting there, hearing the note slide under the door. What was her immediate reaction? Sudden or slow?
- Quote: What could be going through her mind?

## SITUATION:

- What kind of choice is she in the middle of?

#2



Gallery 218

## READING:

- What happened to the collapsing woman? Is she sick? Did she faint? Why?
- Why does the man in yellow have his arm raised? Is he a messenger delivering bad news? Or is he telling a story?
- What kind of event is this? A board meeting?

## IMMERSION:

- Film Clip: Imagine the audience listening to the story intently, then suddenly, the speaker raises his arm and voice dramatically, and the young woman faints.
- Quote: Imagine what moment in the story the orator might be relating. What could the man in red be saying?

## SITUATION: (From the man in red's perspective)

- What part of the story is he experiencing?



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#3



Gallery 218

## READING:

- How is the man in the middle different from the others around him? Is he frightened? Does he look like he's in charge?
- What kind of people are these? An army?
- What is happening around them? What are many of them staring at? (Hint: Look closely in the waves.)
- Why does the leader of this group have his staff raised? Could he be causing the tumultuous conditions?
- Where is he looking with such scorn?

## IMMERSION:

- Sounds: What do you hear in the bedlam?
- Sensations: Feel the wind and the spray.
- Pose (man with staff): Raise your arm as if you were brandishing a sword in battle.

## SITUATION: (From the man with the staff's perspective)

- Read the background story.
- What danger were the man's followers about to face?

#4



Gallery 222

## READING:

- What kind of woman is this? A princess?
- What time of day is it? Is she leaving the fields or is she coming to work? (Hint: She's holding a sickle. Is she facing the village?)
- Why has she stopped? What has caught her attention? Is she looking at something? Did she hear something?
- What is her reaction to what she notices? Fear? Annoyance?

## IMMERSION:

- Sounds: What kind of sounds might you hear out in the fields? What do you see in the painting that could make a sound that stops her in her tracks? (Hint: Look in the sky.)
- Quote: What could she be thinking as she listens?

## SITUATION:

- What has she been stopped by on her way to work?

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#5



Gallery 223

## READING:

- Where is this scene taking place? A sunny valley?
- What kind of creature is this? How vicious is it?
- What does the young man intend to do?
- What are his chances of defeating the monster? How have others fared?

## IMMERSION:

- Sensations: Imagine the smells. Imagine the sounds of the creature.
- Film Clip: What was the creature doing before the young man arrived? How did it react? What will happen in the next few moments?

## SITUATION: (From the young man's perspective)

- What moment in the battle does this scene show?

(Warning: this scene contains images which may not be appropriate for a younger audience)

#6



Gallery 216

## READING:

- What kind of woman is this? A stern spinster?
- What kind of book is she reading? Her chemistry textbook? (Hint: The headers at the top of the opened pages read "Abelard" and "Heloise.")
- Aside from the book in her hand, what else is on her desk?
- Why has she stopped reading? Has she been interrupted?

## IMMERSION:

- Quote: What could she be thinking about? Or rather, daydreaming about? Imagine the passage she might have just read.
- Pose: Tilt your head back, part your mouth, and roll your eyes up. Then compare this pose to the one of *Madame Francois Buron*, in a painting to this one's left. How are they different?

## SITUATION:

- What meaning does the book she's reading have to her?



Madame Francois Buron  
by Jacques-Louis David in 1769.

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## BACKGROUND STORIES

#1 **BACKGROUND: *Hesitation*.** There is no specific background story.

**SITUATION:** The young wife, alone in the room, sewing, hears a note slip under the door. Her interest is sudden as she gets up to reach for the illicit message. But she pulls back as she starts to weigh the consequences of what picking up the note and reading it would mean. (Hint: Did you notice the painting to her right?) Imagine having your established life interrupted by a tempting but life-altering proposition.

**REACTION:** Intrigue followed by consideration of the consequences. She sprang up with interest, but stopped herself, and is now thinking of the meaning of picking up the note and reading.

**CONNECTIONS?** *Casablanca*. Any other romantic dramas? When have you found yourself thinking over the deep implications of acting on temptation?

By Alfred Stevens in 1867.

#2 **BACKGROUND: *Virgil Reading the "Aeneid" to Augustus, Octavia, and Livia*.** Augustus (in red) was the first emperor of Rome. Octavia was his sister, and Livia, his wife. Virgil is telling the story of the Trojan Hero Aeneas's legendary journey from the devastated city of Troy to, eventually, Italy, where he founded Rome. Not only is the story filled with drama, but Augustus considered himself to be a descendant of Aeneas.

**SITUATION:** Arriving at an intense part of a story you're absorbed in.

**REACTION:** Being so overwhelmed with emotion from experiencing the drama that you can't take it.

**CONNECTIONS?** When have you been overwhelmed by a novel, movie, or artwork?

By Jean Baptiste Wicar in 1790/93.

#3 **BACKGROUND: *The Destruction of Pharaoh's Army*.** The prophet Moses led his people from the clutches of a tyrannical pharaoh. To escape, Moses miraculously parted the Red Sea. The Pharaoh's army pursued, and were about to catch up, when Moses's people had reached the other shore. Moses saw to it that they were no longer pursued when he collapsed the gateway of the parted sea onto the pursuers.

**SITUATION:** The impending danger to those who count on you. When have people who counted on you faced difficulties?

**REACTION:** Taking fierce, grand action and not relying on those who count on you.

**CONNECTIONS?** *The Lord of The Rings* (Gandalf), Michael Jordan (he takes over the basketball game when his team seems helplessly defeated). When have you taken charge with your ability?

By Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg in 1792.

#4 **BACKGROUND: *The Song of the Lark*.** She is a European peasant who would work from dawn 'til dusk in the fields. She doesn't represent any particular character. The lark is considered to have a more elaborate call than most other birds. (Hint: Find a recording of a lark singing, e.g., on YouTube, and play it while you watch the painting.)

**SITUATION:** A young peasant girl on her way to work in the fields one quiet dawn hears a lark singing its beautiful song. When have you noticed beauty in your daily routine?

**REACTION:** Stopping to be awed by the solemn, quiet beauty that can occur around you.

**CONNECTIONS?** *Anne of Green Gables*. *The Sound of Music* (Maria). Your life?

By Jules Breton in 1884.



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- #5 **BACKGROUND: *Hercules and the Lemaeon Hydra*.** The great Greek hero, Hercules, goes to face the vaunted Hydra as part of one of the Twelve Labors he must complete. The multi-headed dragon, which has vanquished would-be heroes, rises up to meet the impetuous young hero as he comes to find it in its lair.
- SITUATION:** The hero has moved in and now stands face to face with his foe at its most fearsome and intimidating. When have you come face to face with a daunting challenge?
- REACTION:** Standing up to the enemy you are about to take on.
- CONNECTIONS?** David and Goliath, Old West shootouts. What intimidating challenges have you met face to face?

By Gustave Moreau in 1875/76.

- #6 **BACKGROUND: *Lady Reading the Letters of Heloise and Abelard*.** Heloise (died 1146) and Abelard (1079-1142) are a famous couple from the Middle Ages who remained in love with each other in spite of being separated by religious and social convention. Their correspondence during their long separation has been preserved and published. The young woman in the painting isn't any particular character.
- SITUATION:** With her own real-life love letters at hand, the young woman picks up a book depicting ideal devotion. When have you sought stories to mirror your life?
- REACTION:** She feels bliss of experiencing vicariously what she hopes for herself.
- CONNECTIONS?** *Shakespeare in Love*. When have you felt bliss from art that is accented by your own personal experience?

By Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg in 1792.

**Here is a brief explanation of the process.** For a more in-depth discussion of the ideas, please refer to the book, *Touching the Art*.

### **I. PREVIEWING: Be selective!**

- › Come up with a quick “title”
- › Which works intrigue you most?

### **II. READING: Describe what you see!**

- › Who are the characters?
- › What’s happening?
- › “Shuttle” between details and generalizations.

### **III. IMMERSION: Bring the image to life!**

- › “Sounds” and “Sensations”: Notice the details in the scene that can be imagined to affect your senses.
- › Pose: Take the pose of the character to get a better “feel” for what his body is expressing.
- › Quote: Imagine what the character could be saying or thinking.
- › Film Clip: Imagine that the image is a movie clip on pause. Imagine the “action” that came before and after the scene in the artwork.

### **IV. SITUATION AND REACTION:**

- › The “situation” is the circumstance the main character finds himself in. Try to relate personally to the situation!
- › The “reaction” is how the main character responds to his situation.

### **V. CONNECTIONS:**

- › Relate the moment depicted to scenes from movies, literature, and your own life.

**Enjoy!**