

The Art Museum Treasure Hunt

by Patricia L. Hollingsworth

We are going to New York City! I will get to visit my beloved Metropolitan Museum. Oh joy! Oh rapture! And from my two children a definite discordant note: “Oh no! Oh why do we have to go? We always go to museums. Do we have to go?”

To an art teacher and passionate art lover, this reaction is tough criticism. For art-loving parents everywhere, such feedback is heartbreaking. Many of us feel that art enlarges our lives and is a feast for our eyes and soul. My first thought, fortunately not verbalized, was, “After all the wonderful exposure to art that I have given you, you don’t want to go? Just stay here then, watch TV, and grow stupid and ignorant.” Actually I knew their response was coming and had been thinking about it. There had been mild grumbling when we went to a museum a few months ago that went something like, “When are we leaving? I’m tired. Can we go now?”

In a moment of inspiration, my better, second thought, which I did verbalize, was, “This time when we go, we’re going to have a treasure hunt.” I said this with more confidence than I felt so I added, “They have a cafeteria and we’ll eat lunch there.” They looked a bit relieved. I was gaining speed, “We’ll even need to go to the gift shop to do part of the treasure hunt.” They ran off to play. Now I was committed to produce.

All About Treasure Hunts

Museum treasure hunts can range from simple to very complex, from requiring very little preparation to vastly elaborate preparation. Your time and interest are the only limits. What is important is that the treasure hunt gives your visit a purpose and makes it more fun for your children. It makes a museum visit into a game with direction.

The Postcard Treasure Hunt: This hunt requires no prior knowledge or preparation. It has the advantage of letting your children be involved in the direction and purpose of the game.

Go first to the museum shop with your children. Give each child enough money to buy about five postcards of artwork that is currently on display at the museum. The goal of this hunt is to find each of the works of art in the museum.



When a child finds a work of art, you may want to mention the artist’s name, briefly explain why you like the work, and ask the child a few questions about it. What do you like about the work? Why do you think the artist used those colors? Watch your child’s response carefully as you want this to be engaging.

On the way out, if the children are still interested, you could go back to the shop to buy a few more postcards of works they saw. You might state that it would be fun to return to see the artwork again. Ask the museum attendant if each child might have a museum brochure to take home.

The Postcard Treasure Hunt can be done by anyone who can read. It does not require any background in art. In fact, it can be used at all types of museums. The only requirement is that the museum have postcards for sale.

A Treasure Hunt Album: At home each child can start a treasure hunt album box of his or her own. While they are putting together the albums in boxes, you can mention the artist’s name and discuss the work of art again. Have your children include the brochure with the postcards.

The Category Game: With each child now having a personal art collection, you are ready to move into teaching aesthetic theories, a project which is much more fun than it sounds. Put simply, artwork generally displays one of three primary purposes.

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(These art categories often appeal to bright children because they enjoy knowing and using long words.)

- **Representational art** tries to imitate the real world as we see it. It is often called realism, but representation is probably a more accurate term. Representationalism is all the things that our eyes can see. Winslow Homer's art is often representational.
- **Emotionalism** as a purpose means that the art expresses ideas, thoughts, and moods that cannot be seen easily. Religious art is an example of emotionalism, as is socialist art or social criticism, because the most important aspect of the art is the idea. The prime purpose of many Vincent van Gogh paintings is emotionalism. He is showing us things that we do not see with our eyes but feel with our emotions.
- **Formalism** primarily focuses on the composition or formal qualities of the art. In other words, the work of art is primarily concerned with lines, shapes, textures, and colors. At the Metropolitan Museum, Jackson Pollock's work is a good example of formalism as is some of Pablo Picasso's work.

Art classifications are important because they help viewers understand and appreciate art. If you know and recognize that a work of art primarily reflects lines and color, you will not expect it to look like a photograph. You would not judge onions by apple standards. A person is more likely to enjoy a formalist work if he or she judges it by formalist standards.

Show your children examples of representationalism, emotionalism, and formalism. Then make a game of selecting examples for each of the categories. The next time you go to a museum, ask each child to find as many examples of each as possible. It is not necessary that everyone agree on a category. Great discussions arise when people disagree on what the main purpose of the artwork is. Emphasize that there may be disagreements about which category is reflected in a work of art. It may even seem that some artists have elements of each of the categories; however, one usually dominates over others.

Art Criticism: Being an Art Detective

Art criticism — talking about art — can definitely add complexity to your treasure hunts. The talk can be highly sophisticated or relatively simple. You can add each level of art criticism to a treasure hunt. For example, one way to describe a work of art is to list its colors. In a treasure hunt, you could ask your children to find works of arts with lots of blues and greens.

Or you might increase the vocabulary by asking them to find primary colors (red, yellow, blue). You could ask your children to look for paintings with analogous colors (e.g., shades of blues and greens). Next you might ask them to look for paintings with complimentary colors (e.g., yellow and purple, red and green, and orange and blue.)

One useful method of art criticism requires the observer to defer judgment until after a complete analysis and involves the following four steps that (1) describe the artwork, (2) analyze the way the artwork is put together, (3) look for the meaning of the work, and (4) make a judgment about the work.

As an art detective, it is important to learn to look for clues, see how those clues are put together, and then to use those clues to uncover the meaning of the artwork. Clues to the meaning of an artwork abound, and each step of art criticism will lead you to more clues. There should be at least two times during the art criticism when you make a decision as to what you consider the primary purpose of the artwork. The first is prior to doing any art criticism and the second is when you are discerning the meaning of the artwork. Look at the artwork and decide which is the most important purpose of this work. Representationalism? Emotionalism? Formalism? This decision, of course, may change as you and your children go through the steps of art criticism and discover additional clues.

- **Describe the work:** Both adults and children develop additional art vocabulary while describing the lines, shapes, colors, and textures of an artwork. Not only does describing the work build vocabulary, it also gives you clues to the meaning of the artwork. Sharp angular shapes of yellows and purple create a different feeling than do soft wavy lines of blue and green.
- **Analyze the work:** Analyzing the way the artist has developed the composition gives additional clues to the meaning of the work. A strongly asymmetrical design creates a different feeling than does a symmetrical design.
- **Look for meaning in the work:** Once you have described the lines, shapes, textures, and color and looked at the way the elements are put together in the design, then re-examine the decision you made concerning the purpose of the artwork. Do the clues you have gained seem compatible with the early decision you made? If you have decided that you are looking at a formalist work primarily concerned with color, then you need not look for further meaning.
- **Judge the work:** There will be at least two levels of judgment. On the first level, you decide whether the work is successful in terms of its purpose. For example, you might ask yourself if the work of art is a successful example of one of the art categories described above. For the next layer of judgment, simply ask yourself if you like the work of art. It may be a superb example of emotionalism, but you may not personally like it. Or perhaps it is one you may like to visit but would not hang in your living room.

Adding Movement to Art Appreciation

Prior to doing movement activities in the museum, you should ask permission from the museum staff and other visitors in the gallery. Obviously, busy weekends would not be the right time for this activity. Give your children a refresher course on why no one should touch artwork. First, guards might pounce and that could be unpleasant and possibly, literally, alarming! Some museums have an alarm system that goes off even if you get close to the artwork. Second and more

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important, the oil in our skin leaves a residue on the artwork that quickly catches environmental grime that may ruin the artwork. Therefore, do not touch or get too close to the artwork.

If the museum is not too crowded and your children are well behaved, ask them to dramatize the art. This project can be fun for the whole family with different family members taking different parts of the composition. One person may select to be a tree or a chair, while another person may pretend to be paint dribbling or floating clouds.

If you are in a less expansive mood, you might ask them to draw the lines of the composition in the air with their hands or arms. You can represent dashes and dots of painting with quick repetitive finger movements. You can depict "big and dark," for example, with heavy moving arms. Following the movements of the lines, colors, and shapes often gives additional clues to the meaning of an artwork.

When you talk about the design of a piece of art, have your children stand or sit on the floor in a way that is like the composition. Try to find a very symmetrical work of art and have the children stand in a similar position. Ask them to notice the stable and solid feeling that symmetry evokes. Next try to

find a very asymmetrical artwork. Have them stand as asymmetrical as they can without falling over. Ask them to compare the feelings evoked in the symmetrical composition with those of the asymmetrical composition. The design of the artwork gives more clues to its meaning. The alert art detective will examine all the clues to help in understanding the artwork. It is an exciting business.

My museum visits with my children and others led me to write eight books on art for children. It just goes to show that you never know where your treasure hunts, or your children, will lead you. You do not need to have any art background to begin doing treasure hunts with your children. You will learn along with them. The idea is to have fun and enjoy your next museum adventure. ☐

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