

Visual arts

An approach to appraising artworks

Adapted from an article by Kathleen Caper,
Consultant Education Officer, Casula
Powerhouse Arts Centre

Developing relevant and exciting programs for guiding students through the processes of understanding a work of art can be a challenge for many teachers. The following strategies work best if incorporated into the artmaking program.

The following tasks can be performed individually or in groups.

- Students select a two-dimensional art work as the basis for the project and should not research the work any further than its title, date, materials and dimensions.
- Students copy the work by either drawing or using the same materials as the original. During this process students become quite intimate with the work, and from this point it is possible to start describing or “reading” the work.

The next step should be written. Here the teacher stimulates thought by requesting such information as “Describe what is happening in the picture”, “Describe the use of line and colour”, “Describe the subject matter, forms, media and techniques employed in the work.”

- Move from describing to interpreting the work, with students responding to such questions as: “Do you like this art work?” “Why?”
“Does this work remind you of other art works you have seen?”
“What do you think the artist is trying to say?”
“By comparing the title, image and materials, what does this tell you about the meaning of the work?”
“Is there more than one interpretation of the meaning?”
- Students research the art work in class and compare their responses to those of art critics, art historians and other students. Three-dimensional art works, such as sculpture, jewellery or ceramics, offer new challenges for leading students towards a greater appreciation and understanding of works by artists, craftspeople and designers.

It is important that students are encouraged to approach an art work as an active decision-making process that allows both analytical and imaginative interaction.

Actual contact with art practices outside the school environment is important to enable students to see the application of visual arts in daily life. A walk through your community will provide you with memorial sculptures, fountains, sculpture gardens, artworks in public foyers, and public art projects such as murals and painted bus shelters.

Schools can make use of regional galleries and museums, which offer outreach services, guided tours and workshops. Assistance with structuring a program for students is available by contacting the education officers.

Arts officers employed by your local council and directors of commercial galleries can provide you with contacts within your local arts community. A visit to the workshop or studio of a local artist is a rewarding and enriching experience.