

## Inquiry-Based Touring

“Inquiry teaching assists visitors to transition into learners by helping them develop and practice learning skills—skills they can use again on return visits and in other contexts.”<sup>1</sup>

Inquiry teaching, or instruction by asking questions, encourages museum visitors to really look at and engage with works of art. Questions invite visitors to discover more about art works, analyze artists’ intentions, examine their own responses and attitudes, and share with others.

The major role a guide plays is that of teacher, and teaching is a dynamic process. By asking questions and leading discussions on your tours you involve your museum audience in the learning process. By encouraging visitors to generate their own ideas and construct meaning on their own, you teach them, and you allow them the opportunity to develop many skills they can use to become independent learners in the museum.

There are other good reasons to use inquiry on your tours. If you begin your tour with thoughtful open-ended questions, you learn a lot about where your group is at—attitudinally, intellectually, visually, verbally, and so forth. The use of inquiry creates an atmosphere of trust because it demonstrates that you are genuinely interested in what group members think. Being able to answer questions and talk about art empowers young people and adults. Many people enjoy being included in a conversation more than they enjoy being talked to. It is not enough for many people to simply hear information; they remember best when they have helped to construct the meaning of something themselves.

### Open-ended Questions

The questions you ask on a tour should be open-ended to accommodate the divergent perspectives of the members of any tour group. In order to encourage learners to make observations or to generate ideas, open-ended questions must have several or many appropriate answers. If you ask a question that has a brief and predictable answer, the question is closed-ended. Closed-ended questions often ask visitors to remember factual information; they do not stimulate reflective thinking.

### Sequencing Questions

Questioning will be most successful if you sequence your questions. Begin with basic observation (describing) questions or exercises that encourage visitors to look closely (for example, “Describe what you see” or “What’s going on in this picture?”). Follow up their responses with a question that asks them to back up their responses with evidence from the art work itself (for example, “What makes you think so?” or “What do you see that makes you say that?”). This can often be followed up with a question that asks them to think about their explanations (for example, “Why might the artist have painted it this way?”). By sequencing questions you encourage tour participants to look, explain, and generate ideas.

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<sup>1</sup>Alan Gartenhaus, “Teaching with Questions,” *The Docent Educator*, Vol. 1, No. 3, Spring 1992, p. 2.

## Docent Program Handbook

### Touring Techniques

## Information

Ultimately, it is up to you to determine the balance between information and interaction on a tour. Ask as many open-ended questions as possible. Keep in mind that every time you offer a fact or a judgment about an art work, you limit discussion.

If you need to incorporate information to complete a lesson at a work of art, do so only after you have asked the group to observe and discuss it. You will be surprised at how much visitors will be able to tell *you* about objects and cultures represented in the galleries. They are more likely to remember what they learn if they have invested their own time, energy, and thoughts in the discussion.

The more experienced a group is with looking at art, and the more knowledge they have about art, the more ready they will be to absorb information presented by you. With groups like this your role as teacher is lessened; you become more like a peer talking to them about something that is near and dear to them. With groups that seem uninterested in responding to questions out loud, continue to generate rhetorical questions to encourage them to think on their own.

## Types of Questions

There are many different types of questions you can ask. Many years ago, long before inquiry became standard practice in museum settings, some staff and docents at the Institute developed an inquiry strategy based on the types of questions outlined in The Great Books Foundation training manual. They adapted the Great Books methods for discussing books to methods for discussing works of art using three basic categories of questions: description, interpretation, and association.

The following is a summary of the question types and some examples of each.

### Description Questions

Description questions can be answered by looking at the work of art. They often involve the subject matter or the visual elements used, such as color, line, or shape.

These questions and appropriate follow-up questions encourage tour participants to make observations and to support their observations with evidence from the art works being discussed. Some description questions encourage viewers to describe the subject or action of an art work, while others ask the viewers to analyze or describe how the elements are organized within the work of art.

### Examples

- What's going on in this picture/sculpture? What do you see that makes you say that? (from Visual Thinking Strategies)
- If you could touch this sculpture, how do you think it would feel? What do you see that makes you say that?
- What do you think the climate/weather is like in this scene? What do you see that makes you say that?
- How does the color in this painting differ from the first one we looked at?

### **Interpretation Questions**

Interpretation questions help tour participants explore the meanings of works of art. They require viewers to offer opinions that can be upheld by evidence from the art object. These questions offer the possibility for divergent opinions and the docent should remain open to all responses.

#### **Examples**

- Why do you think the artist chose to place the figure of the woman in the center of this picture? What do you see that makes you say that?
- How do you think the artist felt about the woman? What do you see that makes you say that?
- What do you think the man and woman are smiling about? What do you see that makes you say that?

### **Association Questions**

Association questions ask viewers to consider to what extent an artist's viewpoint or a work of art has application to their own opinions, lives, and/or times. Association questions can be fun and provocative and can help people relate art works to everyday life. However, avoid overusing this type of question since they can get group members (especially young visitors) far away from the art work itself. They should be asked only after the art work has been thoroughly explored and various interpretations of the visual evidence have been discussed. Be sure they enhance the visitors' understanding of the work.

#### **Examples**

- What is similar or different about the environment in this picture and the environment here in Minnesota?
- We saw how this object is used to solve problems between two people. What kinds of things do you do to solve problems?
- What activities would you do in this room if you lived here?

## **Docent Program Handbook**

### Touring Techniques

#### **Tips for Successful Inquiry**

- Ask open-ended questions that encourage multiple responses.
- Ask follow-up questions that encourage even closer looking and which ask individuals to support their observations with evidence from the art work being discussed.
- Ask questions that are appropriate for the group you are talking to (consider age, learning level, experience with looking at art, language, culture, etc.).
- Ask one question at a time.
- Avoid asking “yes or no” questions. These types of questions stop a discussion as soon as the responses are given.
- Avoid asking questions that begin with “Can you . . . ?” or “Who can . . . ?” These types of questions automatically set up some group members to fail if they “can not” see or do whatever it is you are asking.
- Do not be afraid of silence. Allow people time to observe, process, and respond.
- Listen to responses and treat all serious responses as equal even if you think some are not the “right” answers.
- Be flexible enough to let responses to questions determine how the discussion of an art work will unfold.

#### **Visual Thinking Strategies**

As you prepare questions for an inquiry-based tour, be sure to consider the basic questions used in the Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) technique discussed in the handbook entry by that name.