

GALLERY GUIDE

K-12 self-guide

How to Look at a Work of Art

Arts of Africa



A photograph of children in a museum gallery. A young girl in a purple shirt is looking at a large, abstract artwork on the wall. A boy in a white shirt is holding a sketchbook and a pencil. The background is a large, textured wall with a faint, abstract drawing. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent orange filter.

How to Look at a Work of Art

Our world is full of images! It is important that we can “read” them, discover their meaning, and examine why artists make the choices they do. With this guide, you can train your artistic eye and develop visual literacy. We will practice looking closely at details to understand what works of art might be telling us.

Grab a pencil and sketchbook or a piece of paper to use on your tour!

Museum Manners

- Be inspired, ask questions, discuss!
- No touching. Fingers and pencils damage art!
- Please walk slowly and use indoor voices.
- No food or drinks are allowed in the Museum galleries.
- No flash if you are taking photos and be aware of our photo policy available at the Welcome Desk.



Creativity Warmup!

Let's warm up our creative art brains! Look at your shoe and draw it without lifting your pencil off the paper. Think about drawing big shapes first and then go back and add the small details!



Right | Viola Frey, (American, b. 1933) detail of *Ethnic Man*, 1991, porcelain. Purchased with funds from the Phyllis Cannon Wattis Endowment for the Acquisition of 20th Century Art Museum, UMFA2000.11.1A-O.



Slow / Close-looking

Did you know that when people visit museums they spend between 15 and 27 seconds looking at a work of art? That is not very long at all! To really look at something and truly SEE it, we need to slow down. Take a deep breath and spend some time looking and seeing.

Pick a work of art anywhere in the museum and begin by setting a timer for 2 minutes. The more you practice slow, close looking, the easier it becomes. Start with 2-minutes, then try looking longer. Pretty soon you will find yourself looking for 30 minutes or more!

As you look, imagine that your eyes are going on a walk through the artwork. Pick a path and begin moving your eyes to notice every part of the artwork. If walking isn't your thing, imagine your eyes are scanners and scan them back and forth, noticing every single detail.

What did you notice? List some things you saw.

How did the artwork make you feel?

What did it remind you of or what stories could you tell based on what you see?

Can you find one more detail you didn't see before?

Above | Kate Gilmore,
(American b. 1975) detail still
of *Rock, Hard, Place*, 2012, HD
video. Purchased with funds
from The Phyllis Cannon Wattis
Endowment Fund and the
Friends of Contemporary Art,
UMFA2013.10.1.



Sketching

Many people learn better by doing! Sketching is a fun thing to do that also helps you look at a work of art. By drawing what you see, your brain makes connections and helps you understand what you are seeing.

Try These Sketching Prompts:

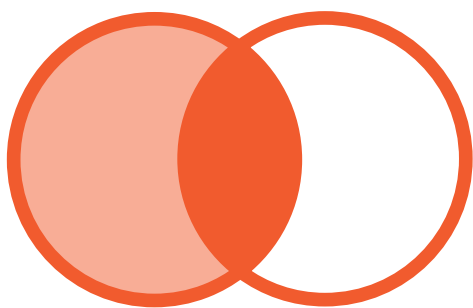
- Start simple with basic lines and shapes, then go back and add more details.
- Try looking at the artwork and not your paper as you draw.
- Make a continuous line drawing by keeping your pencil on the paper and not picking it up.
- If you could add one thing to the work of art, what would it be? Sketch it on your paper!

Below | François Ykens
(1601-1693), Flemish, detail of
Flower Still Life, 1644, oil on
panel. Gift of Val A. Browning,
UMFA1993.034.006.

Remember! Sketching is a practice, not a perfect.
It helps us see things better and develop creative
confidence!



Right | Southwest Pacific, Papua New Guinea, Middle Sepik region, Sawos peoples, detail of *Eating Bowl*, earthenware and pigment. Purchased with funds from the Phyllis Cannon Wattis Endowment for 20th Century Art Museum UMFA1998.22.2.



Compare / Contrast

Sometimes by looking at two or more artworks together, you are able to understand them in new ways. As you walk through the museum's rooms, or galleries, pick two works of art that catch your eye. They can be right next to each other or in different places in the museum.

How are these artworks the same? How are they different?

Sketch two details that the artworks have in common. Write about how they are unlike each other.

Can you find the elements of art in these artworks (line, shape, color, texture, space)? Do the artists use the elements in similar or different ways?

Pick a theme of your own (materials, elements of art, feelings, masks, animals, etc.) and design an exhibit using artworks you see in the museum.



Storytelling

Everyone loves a good story, and the UMFA is filled with stories from all over the world!

Activities to Try:

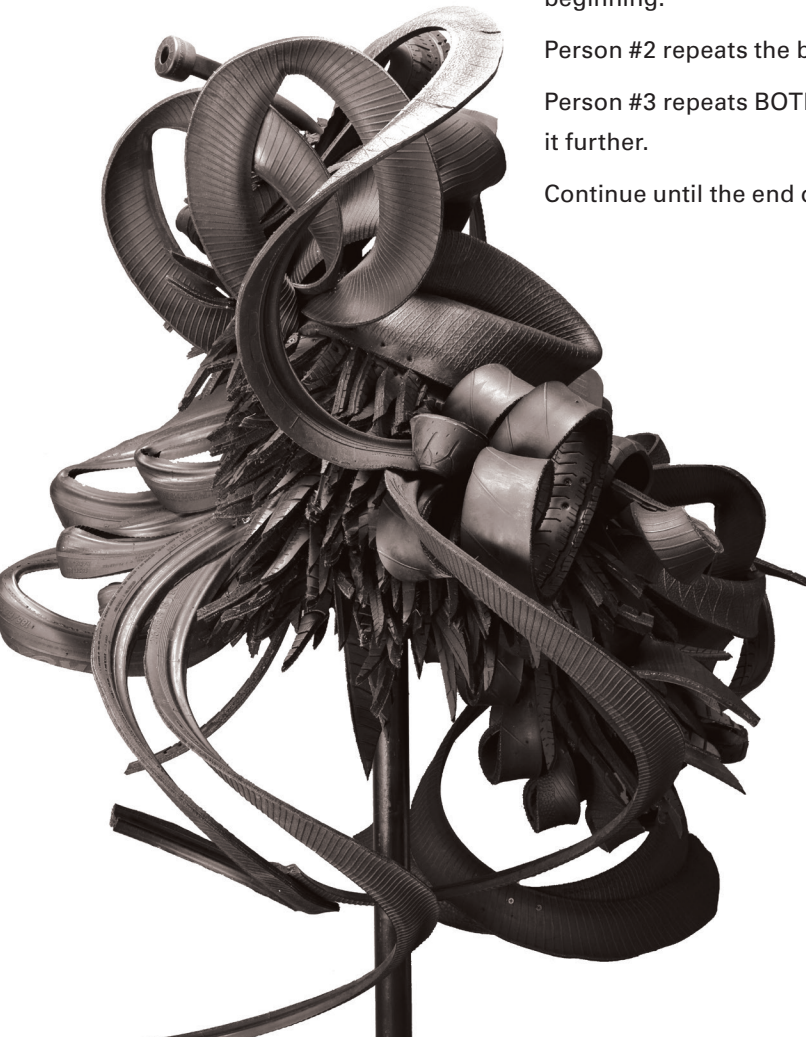
- Look at a work of art for 60 seconds and think about the story it tells. Then give the artwork a title that tells the story.
- Look at another work of art and think about its story. What happened right before this moment? What happened afterwards?
- If you are with a friend or a small group, tell a story together while testing your listening, memory, and critical thinking skills!

Person #1 begins telling a story, but stops just after the beginning.

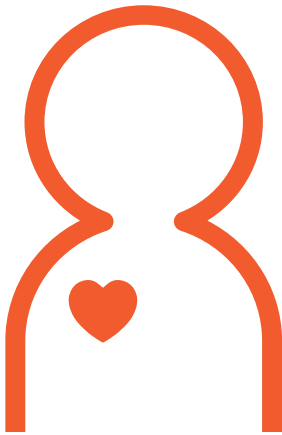
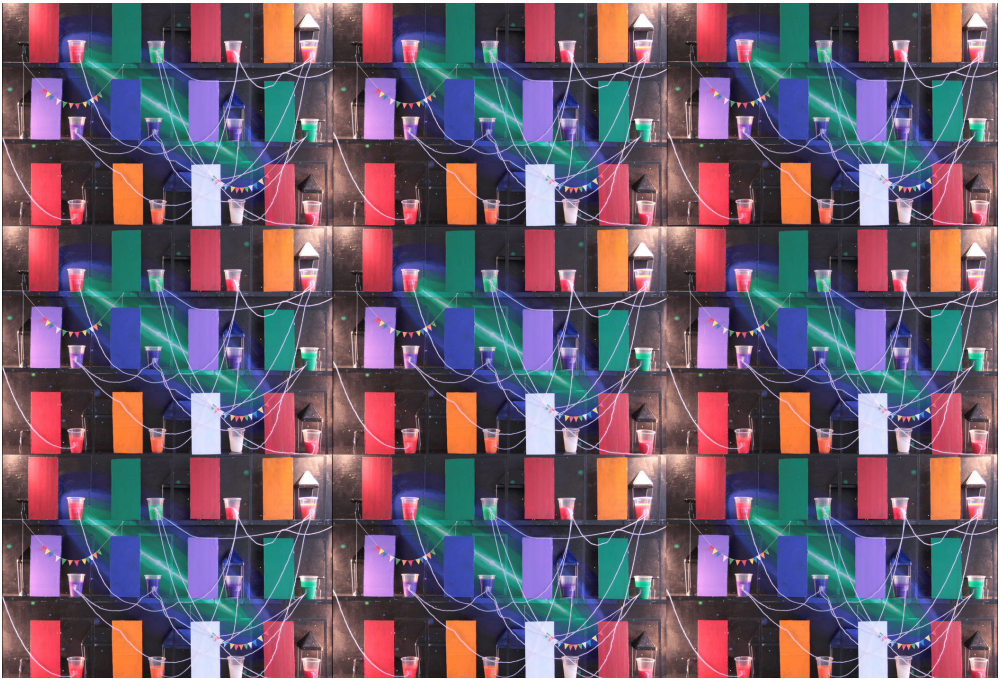
Person #2 repeats the beginning, but adds on to it.

Person #3 repeats BOTH parts of the story and adds to it further.

Continue until the end of the story.



Left | Chakaia Booker (American, b. 1953), *Discarded Memories*, 2008, tires, wood, metal, and paint. Purchased with funds from the UMFA Young Benefactors and The Phyllis Cannon Wattis Endowment Fund, UMFA2009.15.1A, B.



Connect

When you visit UMFA, our hope is that you see yourself in an artwork or an idea. Perhaps you find an artwork that inspires you or teaches you something new. Maybe you meet an artwork that represents your culture or where you are from. Or maybe there is something you think is really beautiful, surprising, or funny. The best way to understand a work of art is to make a personal connection with it!

Use your body to strike a pose to represent a work of art. You could be inspired to dance or put 3 poses together in a sequence to tell the story of what you see!

Can you find an artwork at UMFA that has your favorite color in it? That makes you feel happy or reminds you of your favorite song?

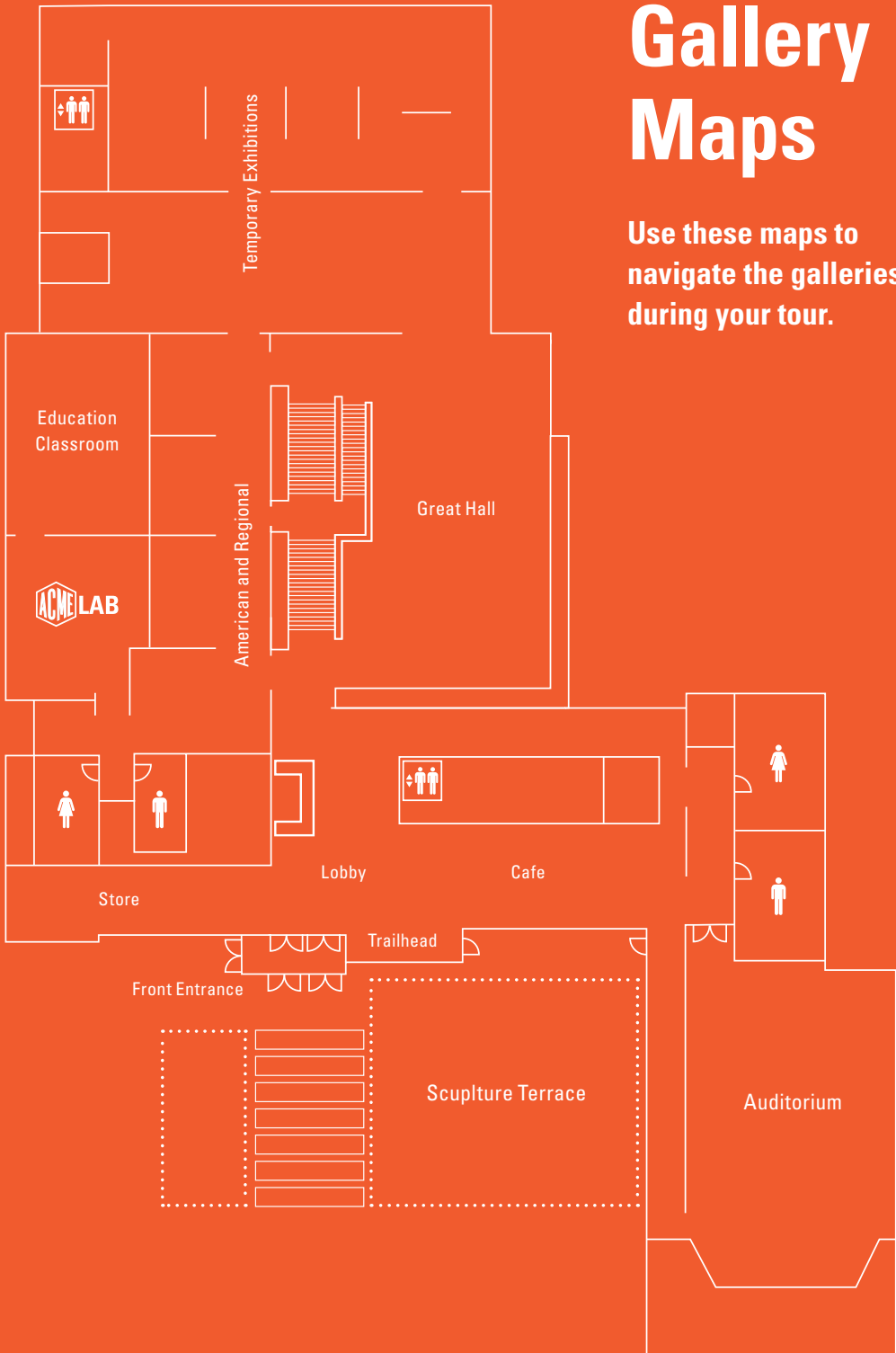
If you could take one artwork home with you (sorry, you can't, though!) – which artwork would you pick? Why?

Above | Ezra Wube (Ethiopian, b. 1980), *Twilight Galaxies*, 2017, stop-action and motion animation. Purchased with funds from Phyllis Cannon Wattis Endowment Fund, UMFA2018.16.2.

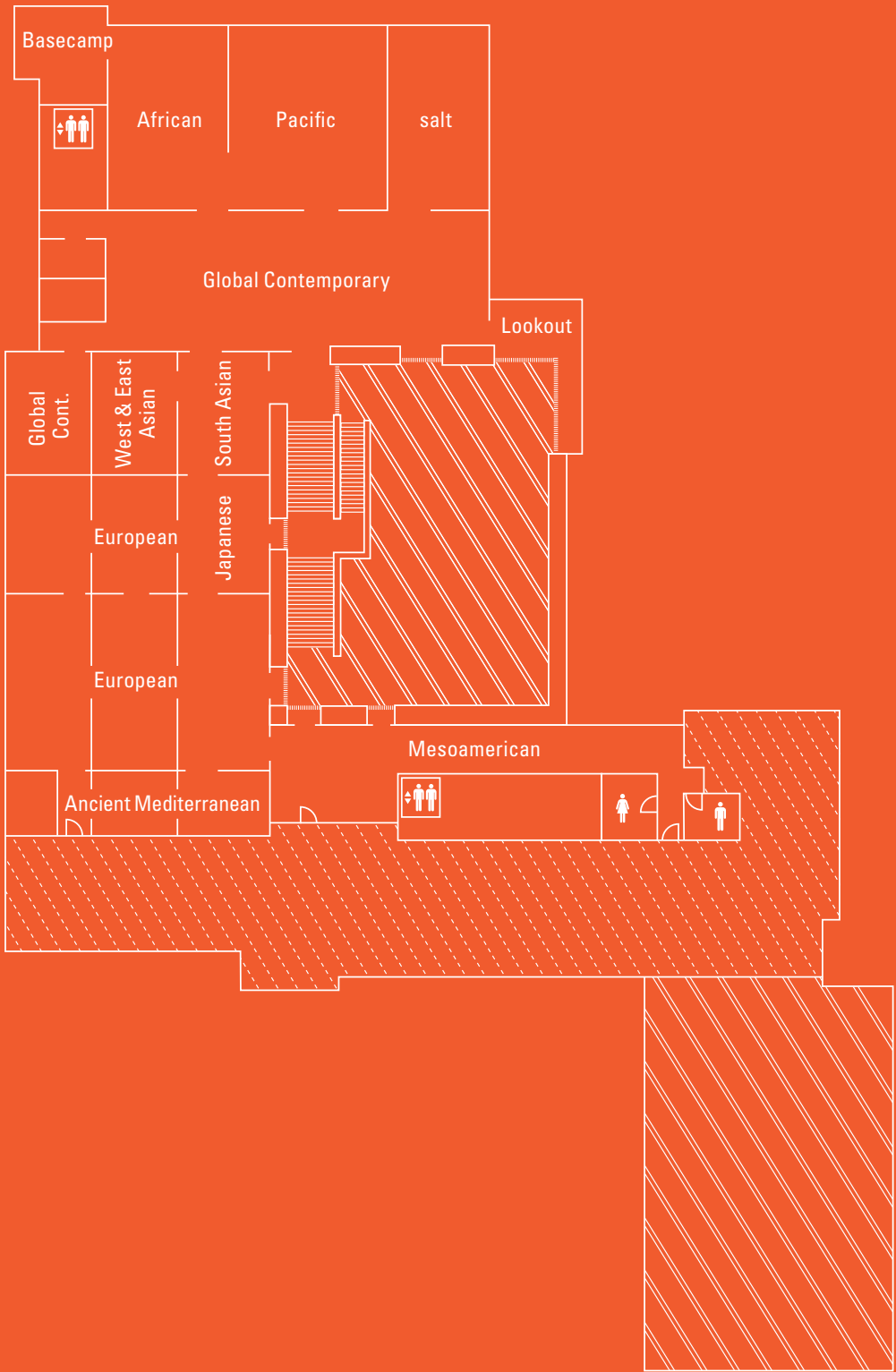
Thanks for exploring UMFA and How to Look at a Work of Art! Keep using these techniques to look and see the many images in our world. Ask questions and keep developing your visual sleuthing powers!

Gallery Maps

Use these maps to navigate the galleries during your tour.



First Floor



Second Floor

