

Tips for Touring African Art with Young People

Plan ahead.

When you talk to the contact person for the group, ask specific questions about them. What is the “group personality” like? Do they have experience with African cultures and/or arts? Does their trip to the museum relate to their current classroom studies? Remind the group leader that we require an adult chaperone for every ten students. (A lack of chaperones can dramatically alter the effectiveness of your tour!)

Customize your tour.

Taking into account the information you got from the contact person, tailor your tour to the age(s) and the interests of the group members. African art might be very new and hard to understand for some younger people, who tend to appreciate rather realistic, narrative subjects more easily than abstract ones. After getting the young people to thoroughly explore the object visually, get them thinking about the artist’s intent and the function of the object to help them understand why it looks the way it does.

Assess the group’s needs.

Before you proceed with your group to the galleries, ask if anyone needs to use the restroom (especially important for smaller children). Survey the group’s physical needs. Smaller children like to ride in the old Otis elevator, and it makes the move upstairs to the galleries go more quickly. Ask one of the adult chaperones to bring up the rear so you do not lose any stragglers.

Establish a climate where everyone can listen and talk comfortably.

When possible, ask the group to sit on the floor. Standing up for an entire hour can be hard on little legs! Let the kids know at the outset that you value everyone’s comments, but that it is very difficult to listen when more than one person is talking. Ask students to raise their hands and take turns talking. Reassure them that everyone who wants to will get a turn to talk. Paraphrase what is said so everyone hears it and to show that you are listening.

Begin your discussion of each object with a long moment of silent looking.

This allows students (and adults) to really look at the work of art and to make their own visual assessment before launching into a discussion. Even a few moments at each object can help students develop their observation skills. Model your expectations by spending the time looking, too.

Be sensitive. Encourage sensitivity.

Model appropriate language for talking about African art and culture. If a child uses a word you deem inappropriate, introduce the more appropriate term into your own comments in a way that makes its meaning clear. Most children will pick up on the new term and incorporate it into their always expanding vocabularies.

If kids react in a negative way (“Ugly! Old! Dirty!”) to the objects, try to refrain from telling them they are wrong. By telling students their immediate observations are incorrect, you risk shutting down any sort of dialogue. Usually, students who react this way are simply expressing their initial culturally-based visual reactions to the objects. Rather than discouraging their comments, redirect their energies into understanding and appreciating African art even though it may look “weird” or “different” to them at first. Although younger students will not be able to comprehend the concept of “African aesthetics” as such, you can use this opportunity to affirm diversity and the key concepts that art serves many functions, and that different people express their experiences and emotions in different ways.

Depending on the group, many of the young people on your tour will probably notice and react to the nudity throughout the African galleries more than adults normally would. Do your best to assess the group’s comfort and maturity levels before bringing nude images into the tour. The best way to handle snickering, pointing, and questions about nudity is to demonstrate to the young people on your tour that you are comfortable with looking at nudes and talking about them. Once the kids sense you are comfortable with the subject matter, they tend to realize it is acceptable, and it usually loses its sensationalism for them.

You may have adult group leaders who insist that their children not see nudes on their museum visit. Respect this request by not including nudes in the tour, but remind the group leader that there are unavoidable nude images throughout the museum that the group may have to pass by to get from object to object.

Ask questions. Answer questions.

You can use questions to help focus young people’s looking. Questions like “What do you see?” or “How would you describe this sculpture?” keep comments focused on visual evidence and allow kids to hone their observation skills and their ability to explain and support their assumptions.

Questions are also a helpful way to relate the works of art on the tour to the students’ own frame of reference. Ask questions about parallels to African object or beliefs in their own lives. (In conjunction with a discussion of the Yoruba divination objects, ask “How do you go about solving difficult problems in your life?”)

Children are full of questions. Be sure to allow them the opportunity to ask what’s on their minds. Treat every question as an important one. (There are no stupid questions!) Admit it if you do not know the answer, and use the opportunity to talk to students about where/how they might be able to find their own answers.

Link ideas.

When the group’s observations begin to slow down, use what you have learned about their interests to steer their discussion toward key ideas. Try to ask questions that will draw connections between what they have said and what you would like them to consider. Stop and

take stock of the observations that have been expressed thus far. Summarize and point out the prevailing points of view and ask for additional comments.

Use props, visual aids, and activities.

Research tells us that people learn best in a variety of different ways. Engaging the group by different means will help you to connect with a larger percentage of the group in a meaningful way and will add to the general interest of your tour (for you and your audience!). Be creative!

RELAX! HAVE FUN!

Although the tour's primary focus is education, it should be fun, too! If you are relaxed, accepting, and have a sense of humor, young people will be more likely to feel at ease and willing to participate in a candid dialogue with you rather than worrying about "right" and "wrong" answers to questions.