

Points to remember about using VTS on school tours

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a group facilitation method used in inquiry-based teaching to help beginner and less experienced viewers grow in confidence and the ability to derive meaning from art. It is based on careful observation and encourages multiple points of view in an informal, nonthreatening context. Participants explore ideas freely together—and learn to back up their observations with visual evidence as seen in the work of art.

“Pure” VTS does not introduce information beyond what the participants have observed. “Hybrid” VTS allows the facilitator to introduce cultural and societal context before or during the discussion, as related to the participants’ observations.

When to avoid using VTS

VTS encourages close looking and critical thinking. However, pure VTS is often inappropriate for Art Adventure artworks for three reasons:

1. Many Art Adventure images are non-narrative,
2. Students have already studied and discussed the images, and
3. School guides often introduce information on their tours to prompt further questions and discussion.

Art Adventure sets include a variety of art produced by a diversity of cultures across time and that are interesting to young people. ***This may include objects that are non-narrative and/or require introducing information to avoid cultural misinterpretation.*** Avoid asking the question “What do you see going on in this picture/sculpture?” when the artwork lacks narrative content or may be culturally specific and not open to multiple interpretations.

Examples of works that are not appropriate for VTS:

Kongo [Power Figure](#); Clementine Hunter’s [The Wash](#); Lakota [Winter Count](#); China [Jade Mountain](#); India, [Uma-Maheshvara](#) (Shiva’s Family); Nayarit [House Group](#).

What about using a hybrid version of VTS?

You could give culturally specific information before entering into a hybrid use of the VTS questions, to set a framework for students that supports the cultural interpretation of an artwork. Then you could paraphrase and point out what the students notice.

An example would be the [Nayarit House Group](#), thought to represent a family gathering for a meal as well as depicting ancestors below the family. You could say “We think a family is shown here, gathering together to eat a meal, and their ancestors are below, doing the same thing in their afterlife. What do you see in this sculpture that might show a family?”

You may also redirect in using VTS if a student erroneously reports an error in what they see, in a respectful manner in the paraphrase. Example, “I see why you would believe this is made of metal because it is so shiny and dark. Because this wood object is so old and has been used so much, it has gotten this smooth surface.”

When in doubt on whether VTS is appropriate, reach out to your Mia educator.

How do I redirect from comments that affirm stereotypes or hurtful assumptions about a particular people or culture?

In opening up comments to what students see and think, comments you receive may reflect stereotypes children become familiarized with in the media or perhaps encounter in their community. It is important to step in and redirect the conversation appropriately to mitigate any hurt to other participants in the group.

An example of this was provided by our colleagues at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (MOCA), when educators were giving school tours of an exhibition of Kerry James Marshall’s artworks: “They [students] were surprised at the black figures playing golf and lounging in what many identified as a country club. Although these comments recognize the existence of systemic racial and economic barriers to black Americans, they also perpetuate racial and classist stereotypes that suggest black people do not play golf, water ski, picnic or belong in the leisure spaces depicted.”

The educators developed a “societal frame” to help redirect comments and understanding of students. For the example above, the educators would say something like “You are thinking about how and where black people are often depicted, and noticing that this image bucks those patterns.” With a societal frame, you can zoom out to reasons why such stereotypes may exist without shaming the student who made the comment.

This is an excellent article to explore more: [The Societal Frame: A Tool To Address Racism in the Galleries](#)

So when should I use VTS?

VTS can be appropriate and enlightening for discussion when used with an artwork (an Art Adventure substitute or Highlights artwork) that has narrative content but no set interpretation.

VTS often works well with modern and contemporary artworks that are not culturally specific, allowing students to dive into an exploration and develop their critical thinking skills through being asked to support their ideas with what they see. VTS also supports multiple interpretations of artworks, empowering students to offer their opinions. Facilitators can add information as seems appropriate to further the discussion.

Examples of works that are appropriate for VTS:

Tamayo’s [The Family](#); Fearon’s [Silver and Green](#); Beckmann’s [The Skaters](#); Degas’ [Portrait of Mlle. Hortense Valpinçon](#); Signac’s [Snow, Boulevard de Clichy, Paris](#); Bonnard’s [Dining Room in the Country](#)