

ADDRESSING NUDITY IN ART

Museum of Art and Archaeology



“The nude” is an important facet of the artistic tradition dating back to ancient times, making the unclothed figure unavoidable in a comprehensive consideration of art. Artists included in the Museum’s permanent collection have frequently used the nude figure. A challenging aspect of leading tours is helping visitors understand and intelligently appreciate nudity in art. It is sometimes a difficult subject regardless of the age of the tour group! You know your students/children best, so you know the best way to talk to them prior to a visit to the Museum.

Nudity can be discussed in terms of the reasons artists choose to portray the human body or form without clothing:

1. The human form is beautiful, making it an ideal subject for art.
2. The human body can be expressive. It may be used to express a full range of emotions and feelings to which the viewers can relate. Young museum visitors might be encouraged to recreate the subject’s pose in hopes of better understanding the expressive qualities of the work, perhaps taking their minds off the fact that the subject is unclothed. A possible subject for open-ended discussion for older visitors is the difference between “nudity” and “nakedness.”
3. The human form is part of the commonality which holds the human race together. It is familiar to all peoples regardless of background, sex, education, culture, or ethnic identity. Thus, artists often use the human form in their art to express universal truths and to address those ideas or concepts which bind all human beings together.
4. Because of our familiarity with the human form, artists can use it to symbolize human values, e.g., a pregnant woman or nursing mother often symbolizes innocence. Also, artists can use distortion of the body or simplification of human form to achieve an emotional recognition and intellectual response to the artwork from the viewer because of our immediate identification with the human form.
5. The human body contains variations of all geometric shapes such as the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, the cube, etc., making it an ideal subject for exercises in rendering and demonstrating artistic ability and creativity. The body is viewed as a design form of shapes, highlights, and shadows.
6. The human body is anatomically consistent, which makes it a good subject to represent realistically. Throughout history artists have gone to great lengths, including dissection, to examine human anatomy in order to achieve artistic accuracy.



Here are some other tips to consider from the Art Institute of Chicago:

1. Be sensitive to the personal and academic needs of students. Consider students':
 - a. age/stage of physical development
 - b. culture/religion
 - c. parents' reactions
 - d. comfort level with you.

2. Be comfortable with the subject matter.
 - a. Ask yourself whether you are comfortable talking about nudity before embarking on the subject matter with students.
 - b. Practice talking about the subject with family or friends.
 - c. Take a “no big deal” attitude. Kids will respond to the subject with ease if you teach the subject with ease.
 - d. Take control of the discussion to get through moments of discomfort.
 - e. Make wise choices about which artwork you present. Include a variety of body types—skinny, tall, short, pudgy, male, female, etc.
 - f. Works should represent multiple cultures, geographical regions, functions, and artistic styles.
 - g. Present the artwork within social, historical, and geographical contexts.
 - h. Take your students' needs and interests into consideration when selecting objects.

3. Build a relationship: frequent contact with artwork that features nudity and discussion about the objects helps make the topic more familiar and less scary. A lengthy classroom discussion about nudity works better than just briefly touching on the subject in the Museum.

These methods of approach and more can be found at:

<http://www.artic.edu/aic/students/trc/nudesinart.pdf>

The Bare Facts about Greek Art

(from *Museum Guides for Kids, Greek & Roman Art* by Ruthie Knapp and Janice Lehmborg)

First-time museum viewers may be surprised to find that most sculpture of Greek gods, heroes, and athletes are shown without clothes. This is because the Greeks were the first people to discover how to realistically portray and even “improve” the human body in art—giving it beautifully proportioned limbs, well-developed muscles, and idealized contours. What better way to honor gods and heroes than to show them in their perfect natural form? Covering the body with clothes only concealed its natural beauty. For this reason, Greek society accepted nudity. Athletes practiced and competed in the nude, and countless statues honoring them were placed in public spaces.