

# Art & Creative Writing

## A Resource Guide for Visiting LACMA

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### About this Guide

This guide contains information and activities that will help you prepare for your students' visit to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). This guide includes:

- **Information about your tour and about LACMA**
- **Selected works of art with information, questions, and prompts:** These examples represent the types of art, method of discussion, and activities that your students will experience in the galleries. The artworks profiled in this guide may not be on view in the galleries during your tour.
- **Pre-visit activities:** In preparation for your trip, you may wish to use the featured works and discussion questions in conjunction with the activities listed in the "Before Your Visit to the Museum" section below.
- **Post-visit activities:** After your trip, extend learning with the activities suggested in the section "After Your Visit to the Museum."
- **Related California Standards:** All LACMA tours for students address Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and other California state standards.
- **Further Resources:** Use these resources in your lesson planning or share them with your students, as appropriate, to provide additional information and background.

### About the Museum

LACMA is the largest encyclopedic museum in the western United States with more than 100,000 works of art. Through its extensive collections, the museum is both a resource to and a reflection of the many cultural communities and heritages in Southern California. The collection includes artworks from various cultures from prehistoric to the present.

### About LACMA School Tours

Student experiences in the museum are grounded in close looking, inference, and inquiry. By closely examining works of art and inferring what is depicted based on observation, students construct their own understandings about works of art. LACMA docents are trained to facilitate discussion rather than lecture about facts and dates, allowing students the opportunity to share what they notice and therefore, what they are naturally interested in discussing. Docents will guide students to come to their own conclusions and use visual evidence to support their opinions. In this method of learning, rather than determining whether answers are "right" or "wrong," students discover the satisfaction of constructing meaning with their peers.

### Introduction to the Tour

Works of art can provoke reflection, inspire imagination, and spark curiosity in students. That is why art provides excellent fodder for imaginative, descriptive, and thoughtful writing. In this tour, students explore the connections between art, imagination, and the written word. They discover how art can spark a writer's imagination and how writing can help them to better understand art. Students will look closely at works of art and then complete creative writing exercises using such devices as figurative language, sensory description, and dialogue. Writing pads, pencils, and stools are provided. This guide explores the following big idea question that relates to the tour theme – How can looking closely at works of art spark imagination?

This tour is aligned with California State Standards for Visual Arts for grades 6–12 and Common Core state standards for English Language arts for all grades.

## Before Your Visit to the Museum

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To prepare students for writing in the galleries, you may wish to complete the following writing activities:

### Artful Dialogue

Select two different portraits. Have students look closely at the clothing, facial expression, pose, and setting (if applicable) of each sitter. Invite them to compare and contrast the portraits. Have students write a dialogue about what they think the sitters would say to one another if they were both alive today. What could the sitters bond over (e.g., common interests or experiences)? What might they argue about?

### A Multi-Sensory Walk

Display a reproduction of a landscape. Have students imagine they are a character standing in one part of the painting. What could they see, hear, taste, touch, and smell? Encourage students to picture themselves walking to another part of the painting. Along the way, something interrupts them. What could have happened? Have students write a journal entry that describes the sights and sounds of their walk and what happened.

### Inspire Figurative Language

In figures of speech such as simile and metaphor, words are used beyond their literal meanings to convey a particular effect. Because works of art combine real-life imagery and imagination, they can inspire students to go beyond literal meanings in their writings. Have students view a work of art that portrays emotion. Create a class poem by having each student write a line using simile or metaphor to describe the emotion conveyed in the work of art (e.g., *melancholy as an overcast day*, *boredom is a bus stop without a bus*).

## After Your Visit to the Museum

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Extend your students' learning after their visit to the museum with the following activities:

### Research, Revise, Critique

Lead a class discussion about which works of art students viewed at LACMA that most effectively inspired them to write. Have each student select their favorite work of art and the corresponding writing assignment that they completed in the galleries. Tell them to conduct independent research to learn more about the artwork and the artist. Have students use their research as the basis for revising the writing assignment. As they make revisions, encourage them to consider the following:

- Did any information about the artist and his or her intention inform your writing?
- Could you add more details?
- Could you use more vivid language to convey what is happening?

Conduct a writer's workshop with the revised works by having student peers comment on the following:

- What is your favorite part of the writing, and why?
- Are there any lines or passages that confused you?
- Which moment could benefit from more vivid language or details?
- How did the writing give you a new understanding of the work of art that inspired it?



***Smoke***

TONY SMITH

(United States, 1912–1980)

1967, fabricated 2005

Painted aluminum, Installation: 290 x 564 x 396 in. (736.6 x 1432.56 x 1005.84 cm)

Made possible by The Beldegrun Family's gift to LACMA

in honor of Rebecka Beldegrun's birthday (M.2010.49)

<http://collections.lacma.org/node/215109>

# Smoke

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## About the Work of Art

"Don't you love it? It's crazy. It strikes me as one of the most profound things I've ever seen. It's so serene."

—Tony Smith

Installed in the atrium of LACMA's Ahmanson Building, artist Tony Smith's immense sculpture *Smoke* soars and fills the museum space. *Smoke* was one of the largest sculptures ever conceived by the American artist and the only large-scale work he created specifically for an interior space. It soars twenty-four feet high and extends forty-eight feet in length.

The structure reflects the artist's lifelong exploration of organic patterns, comprising close-packed hexagons (like honeycomb), each supported by a triad of columns. Due to its monumental scale, visitors can view the work of art from many vantage points and from two different levels of the building. As the viewer walks below, around, and through the work, the asymmetrical sculpture appears to take different forms. It seems to rise and swell "like the skeleton of a cloud."

Traditionally, sculpture has been regarded as a self-contained entity distinct from the space surrounding it. Smith challenges conventional notions of sculpture because of the work's relationship to the space around it and to the space that is visible through it. In *Smoke*, the voids between the hexagons and columns are just as important to one's experience of the sculpture as are the huge masses of aluminum. The title seemed appropriate to Smith because the complex spaces created by the piece appear to defy logic, like smoke.

*Adapted from "Curator's Notes" by Stephanie Barron (2011).*  
<http://collections.lacma.org/node/215109>.

## Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work using the following prompts and questions:

- What words come to mind when you see this sculpture?
- View the sculpture from multiple vantage points. What additional words come to mind?
- How does your experience of the sculpture change when viewing it from different perspectives?
- What do you notice about the size and scale of the sculpture? The color?
- What does the sculpture remind you of?
- If this sculpture came to life, how would it move? What sounds would it make?
- The title of this sculpture is called *Smoke*. What words come to mind when you think of smoke? How are these words and qualities similar to or different from the words you used to describe the sculpture?
- Consider the qualities of smoke (e.g., lightness, ephemerality, obstructed vision, fills the air). What else has those same qualities? How can smoke be a metaphor for something else?
- Write a "list poem" inspired by *Smoke* by creating a list of words or phrases, each describing a different aspect of the sculpture, such as its size, scale, color, and subject.



***Banquet Still Life***

ABRAHAM VAN BEYEREN

(Holland, 1620/1621–1690), Holland, 1667  
Oil on canvas, 55½ x 48 in. (141 x 121.9 cm)  
Gift of The Ahmanson Foundation (M.86.96)  
<http://collections.lacma.org/node/252178>

# Banquet Still Life

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## About the Work of Art

A wooden tabletop is overflowing with imported foods such as grapes and lemons, foods like oysters that are familiar to Dutch people, luxurious Chinese porcelain, and Venetian-style glass. Artist Abraham van Beyeren, who was most known for his exquisite depictions of fish, captures an array of textures and glistening highlights and reflections in this still-life painting.

Van Beyeren commonly used the same objects in different still-life paintings, arranging and rearranging the gold watch, woven basket, Chinese bowl, rumpled tablecloth, and other objects to create different compositions for his patrons.

Still-life paintings depicting rich displays of exotic goods and sumptuous fare were very popular in the Netherlands in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, referred to as the Dutch Golden Age, the Netherlands experienced unprecedented successes in exploration, trade, and commerce. Coinciding with increased wealth, Dutch society developed a taste for collecting exotic specimens, and the demand for naturalistic depictions of goods from around the world increased. Citrus fruits, for example, were valued for their flavor, smell, beauty, and medicinal properties.

Dutch still lifes did not simply delight its viewers, they also conveyed symbolic meanings. Because lemon juice was used to decrease the effects of wine, lemons were commonly associated with moderation. The watch, symbolizing the passing of time, warns viewers that earthly pleasures and human life in general are fleeting.

## Sources

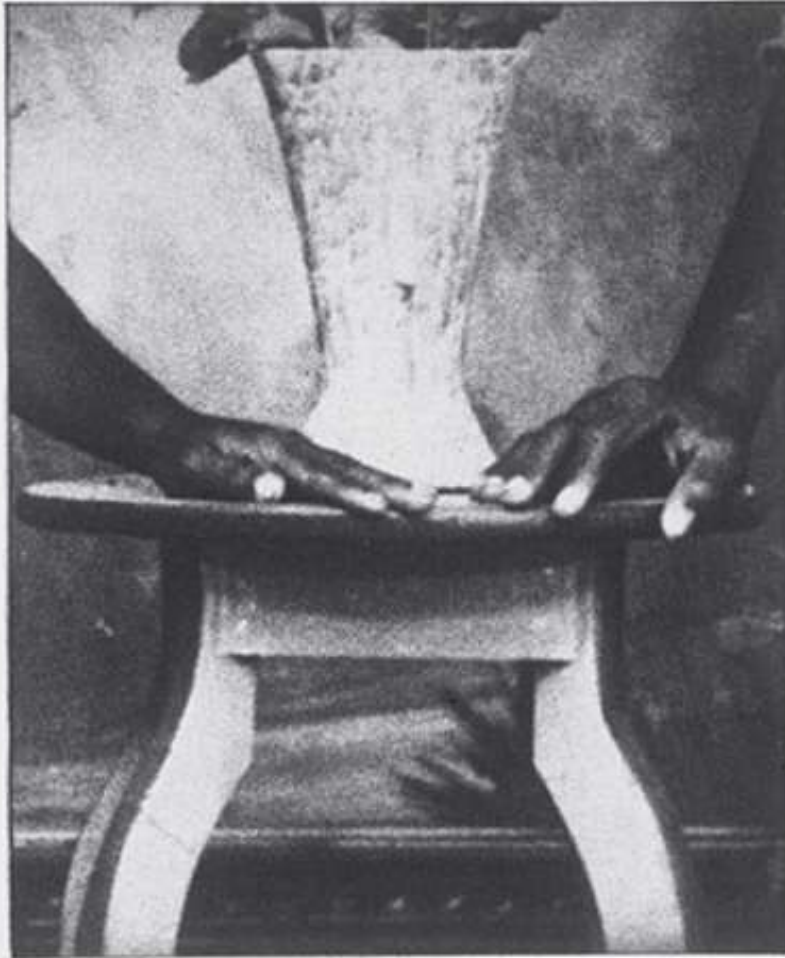
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## Discussion Questions and Prompts

- Discuss the work using the following prompts and questions:
- Look closely at this work of art. What objects can you identify?
- Imagine you are in the painting. Describe what you see, smell, taste, and touch.
- Where would you sit, and why?
- What do you notice about the arrangement of items on the table?
- Consider how tables are set for meals in your home. In what ways is the table in the painting realistically set up for a meal? In what ways is it not?
- Imagine that you could invite anyone (living or deceased) to join you for the meal depicted in this painting. Who would it be?
- Which items do you wish were removed? What items do you wish were included?
- Write a letter to the chef who prepared the meal and set the table. Use sensory details to describe what you and your guest liked and didn't like about the meal.



*stopped speaking to each other*

***Stopped Speaking to Each Other***

LORNA SIMPSON

(United States, New York, Brooklyn, born 1960)

United States, 1996, Photogravure, Image: 6 x 5 in.; Sheet: 10 x 8 in.

Ralph M. Parsons Fund (AC1997.96.1.4) © Lorna Simpson

<http://collections.lacma.org/node/184868>

# Stopped Speaking to Each Other

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## About the Work of Art

New York-based artist Lorna Simpson is best known for exploring issues of race, gender, communication, and identity. Working most often in photography, video, and film, Simpson became recognized in the mid-1980s for provocative photographic works that juxtapose image and text and confront stereotypes, particularly of African American women.

Simpson's early combinations of image and text were influenced by the 1970s feminist movement and her experiences making documentary photographs while traveling around the world. While in graduate school at the University of California, San Diego, where she studied film and fine arts, Simpson began to challenge the supposed objectivity of documentary photography and the power dynamics between the photographer and subject. Starting in the 1980s, Simpson created minimalist narratives by combining cropped, close-up imagery and brief texts. Rather than attempt to convey an objective viewpoint, Simpson created photographic works that encourage multiple meanings.

*Stopped Speaking to Each Other* is one of a set of twenty-one works that depicts close-ups of hands with different props and in varying positions. By omitting particular faces and other individualized features, Simpson de-emphasizes individuality in order to represent many people. A few words accompany each image, serving as a type of caption. But unlike captions used for documentary photographs, Simpson's words do not describe what is literally happening in the corresponding image. She conveys another side to the story—one that is often surprising or contradictory.

## Sources

Grant, Catherine. "Simpson, Lorna." *Grove Art Online*.  
<http://www.oxfordartonline.com:80/subscriber/article/grove/artT097092>

Smith, Cherise. "Fragmented Documents: Works by Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Willie Robert Middlebrook at The Art Institute of Chicago." *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies*. Vol. 24, No. 2, African Americans in Art: Selections from the Art Institution of Chicago (1999), pp. 244–259.

Walker Art Center. "Lorna Simpson."  
<http://www.walkerart.org/collections/artists/lorna-simpson>

## Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work using the following prompts and questions:

- Look closely at the picture while the text is hidden. What do you notice?
- What do you notice about the hands in the image? How are they placed in relation to one another?
- What can you tell about the two people and their relationship to one another based on their hands?
- What else do you notice in the picture? What do those details add to the story?
- Now look at the text at the bottom of the work of art. How does the text affect or alter your understanding of the picture?
- Work in partners to create two drawings that depict what you think happened before and after the scene depicted in Lorna Simpson's work of art. Challenge yourself to convey what happened through close-ups of hands and objects.
- Write a short narrative below each of the drawings.





***Old Trees by a Cold Waterfall***

WEN ZHENGMING

(China, Jiangsu Province, Suzhou, 1470–1559)

China, Chinese, Ming dynasty, dated 1531, Hanging scroll, ink and color on paper

Image: 21½ x 9¼ in.; Mount: 89¼ x 21 in.; Roller: 21 in.

The Ernest Larson Blanck Memorial Collection (55.67.1)

<http://collections.lacma.org/node/231799>

# Old Trees by a Cold Waterfall

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## About the Work of Art

Nature quietly dominates in this hanging scroll by Wen Zhengming, a prolific poet, an esteemed calligrapher, and an influential painter who was regarded as one of the Four Masters of the Ming period in China (1368–1644). Wen was particularly adept at rendering mountains, rocks, and trees, especially pine, cypress, and juniper. Although he painted in his own distinctive style, using precise brushstrokes and creating complex surface patterns, he was deeply influenced by the work of past scholar-painters, whose work he studied for technique and inspiration. He once wrote: "I have loved the calligraphy and painting of the ancients all my life, to the point of forgetting rest and food."

In *Old Trees by a Cold Waterfall*, Wen arranged a cluster of rocks at a diagonal, leading the viewer's eye around the composition through a series of pairs—two men and two rocks in the foreground, two trees in the middle ground, and a pair of rugged peaks in the background. The craggy rocks contrast with the expanse of water, which is evoked by delicate wavy lines subtly interrupting negative space. The quiet, serene mood of the landscape is echoed in the inscription, which has been translated as: "I was alone in my house, there were no guests, no friends, because it was raining. So I took up my brush and painted the trees and waterfall."

This work was created after Wen returned to his hometown of Suzhou. He had been working as a government official in Beijing beginning in 1523, but he had become disillusioned with his political career and withdrew from public life in 1527, focusing his attentions on ink and brush.

## Sources

Clunas, Craig. *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming*. London: Reaktion Books, 2004.

"Wen Zhengming." *Grove Art Online*. <http://www.oxfordartonline.com:80/subscriber/article/grove/art/T091122pg1>

## Discussion Questions and Prompts

Discuss the work using the following prompts and questions:

- Look closely at the landscape. What do you notice first? Where does your eye go next?
- What did the artist do to draw your attention to those areas of the work of art?
- What details do you notice in the foreground? Background?
- How would you describe the mood of this work of art?
- Look closely at the two figures in the foreground and examine their gestures. Infer what they are doing based on what you see.
- What do you think they are saying to one another? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Consider where the figures are depicted in relation to the setting. How would you describe the relationship between man and nature in this painting?
- Consider the title of this artwork. Why do you think the figures are not mentioned in the title?
- Notice how the artist depicts water with negative space and subtle lines. Write a poem about a memory you have with water. Challenge yourself to convey a particular mood with as few words as possible and without using the word "water." Make each word count.

## Related California State Standards

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### California State Content Standards for Visual Arts

#### Grade 6

- Artistic Perception 1.2: Discuss works of art as to theme, genre, style, idea, and differences in media
- Aesthetic Valuing 4.1: Construct and describe plausible interpretations of what they perceive in works of art

#### Grade 7

- Aesthetic Valuing 4.2: Analyze the form (how a work of art looks) and content (what a work of art communicates) of works of art.

#### Grade 8

- Historical and Cultural Context 3.2: Compare, contrast, and analyze styles of art from a variety of times and places in West-ern and non-Western cultures.
- Aesthetic Valuing 4.3: Construct an interpretation of a work of art based on the form and content of the work.

#### Grades 9–12

- Artistic Perception 1.3: Research and analyze the work of an artist and write about the artist's distinctive style and its contribution to the meaning of the work.

### Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts—Grade 5–12

#### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard for Reading

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

#### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard for Writing

2. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
3. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

#### College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard for Speaking and Listening

4. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
5. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

#### Further Resources

The Academy of American Poets. "Poetry Glossary."  
<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/17105>

Philadelphia Museum of Art. *Looking to Write. Writing to Look.*  
[http://www.philamuseum.org/booklets/12\\_70\\_160\\_1.html](http://www.philamuseum.org/booklets/12_70_160_1.html)

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