



## WRITING AT THE DAVID OWSLEY MUSEUM OF ART

The David Owsley Museum of Art provides infinite ways to teach with art, and several of the models used for teaching with art can easily be applied to writing. Art can act as the focal point for assignments in creative writing, the subject for student presentations, the primary text or cultural context for research papers, and so much more. Not only can the Museum of Art be used as a source for writing assignments, it can also be a place for students to come and write and be inspired. The Museum of Art is one of the many resources at Ball State University that helps students engage in a lifelong education and learn skills that they will use for the rest of the lives.

### Writing in the Museum

The museum is an invaluable resource for educators in the classroom, or more importantly, it can provide a chance to teach outside of the classroom. It can provide ways for students to improve as writers, both formally and creatively. Much of how we interpret information in writing can also be applied to art where images merely become the words, a visual language. At the David Owsley Museum of Art, we want to work with you to bridge the gap between verbal and visual literacy.

To do so, we invite faculty to use the museum as a resource and tool in their curriculum, and to understand its values and what it can teach their students.

There are many advantages in using the museum as the source of assignments; it can be an important way to “engage in activities outside of the classroom”—museum staff and faculty work together to provide these opportunities to students (Barnes and Lynch, 488). Using museum-based assignments will teach students to “observe and interpret objects as a way to introduce them to the expectations, major debates, and practices of their disciplines” (Barnes and Lynch, 492). The practice of writing outside the classroom can also teach students how to think critically, how to write essays, how to write “both succinctly and in a language accessible to a broad public,” how to engage in research, “to become critical, self-aware, and culturally sensitive,” and so much more.

Assignments for the museum can be organized into four broad categories that many professors are already using in their curriculum:

- 1.) observation and interpretation
- 2.) analysis and synthesis
- 3.) research
- 4.) organization

Below are sample assignments that can be used for a wide range of disciplines by school teachers, the faculty at Ball State University, and beyond. These examples have been used at the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College. These assignments may not fit every course perfectly, but they can be adjusted to fit almost every educator's needs. They are the spark to ignite the idea that the David Owsley Museum of Art can be a valuable source for learning and enjoyment through writing.

### *Formal writing assignments*

#### **Observation and interpretation:**

With observation and interpretation assignments, students are asked to describe and/or interpret a work or group of works at the museum. The assignment can be oral or written, and generally does not require research, but rather depends on "students' own linguistic skills, experiences, ideas, and powers of visual analysis (Barnes and Lynch, 491)." These assignments would work well as jumping off points for lessons taught during the semester, but can also be used throughout.

Example:

-Study a selection of the museum's objects that relates to the course (example: relates to a time period in history being taught) and without any additional information, each student selects one object and writes a description and interpretation of it. Students are given a half hour to study their object and takes notes, and then a week to finish their observations. -write as if a historian/archaeologist with primary sources, describing objects, and developing thesis on how to read them. (Barnes and Lynch, 491). "communicate what you can reliably *observe* about the object, how the object helps you speculate (interpret) the society that created it, as well as *reflect* on the advantages and limitations of this kind of object as a historical source" (quoted in Barnes and Lynch, 491).

[http://tang.skidmore.edu/app/public/webroot/files/posts/dym\\_assign\\_history.pdf](http://tang.skidmore.edu/app/public/webroot/files/posts/dym_assign_history.pdf)

#### **Analysis and Synthesis:**

The close study of objects is where students "analyze objects and their connections to course texts, lectures, and/or discussion as to synthesize course concepts and skills as well as to synthesize course concepts and skills while engaging with objects and exhibitions" (Barnes and Lynch, 492). Often these assignments are compare and contrast exercises, discussions, or essays where art is connected to the course content.

Example:

-Literature of the Second World War-discusses and analyzes a collection of prints by an artist with differing political views from the students and the other material used in the course on World War II (Barnes and Lynch, 493).

-Read some art criticism about a work of art in the museum. What are some of the distinctive features of the work that art lovers have admired over the years? What are

the particular features of the work that have created the most debate among critics? (Trimmer, 27).

### **Research:**

Research has a wide array of possibilities within the museum, and requires skills from the previous categories such as observation, interpretation, and analysis. While research projects in the art museum are most commonly found with art history courses, these assignments can be made to fit a range of subjects and curriculum.

Examples:

-organic chemistry lab: class researched a past exhibit, *Molecules that Matter*, selected one of the molecules from the exhibit, students worked in small groups to research their chosen molecule, and then gave a presentation about a particular quality of the molecule that they found interesting (Barnes and Lynch, 495).

-Find a portrait in the museum. Read several biographies about the artist who made the work. Who is the figure? What is their relationship to the artist? When did the artist make the portrait? What special techniques did the artist use to capture the figure? How does it compare to other portraits the artist may have done? (Trimmer, 26).

### **Organization:**

The last assignment category asks students to either organize an exhibition themselves or make suggestions of how an existing exhibit might be reorganized physically or intellectually. While these assignments are rare even in the Tang, they can still be tailored to meet the needs of a variety of courses. While these assignments often do require many of the skills required in the previous categories, they are unique in that they “require students to use their research and study of objects as the basis for an organization or reorganization of objects and ideas...they are based on students’ own conceptualizations of the relationships between objects” (Barnes and Lynch, 497).

Example:

-Intro Asian art history course: professor pre-selected 30 objects from the museum, and asked students to curate a mini-exhibition of 5 objects. Students had to organize the objects around a theme, show how the objects relate to each other in a space, and write an introductory text and shorter labels about each of the five individual pieces (Barnes and Lynch, 497).

## *Creative writing assignments/exercises/prompts:*

### **Description:**

“Choose a work of art that you like or find interesting at first sight. Look at it for a minute. Now turn around and write about what you saw. Reread what you wrote and circle the most important things to you. How much of your description answers the key questions: who, what where, why, and how?” (Walsh-Piper, 5).

Make a list of “I wonder” statements about a work of art (Walsh-Piper, 6).

Describe a work of art by writing a poem in free verse, emphasizing the five senses: sight, hearing, taste, sound, smell, and touch (Walsh-Piper, 6).

Pretend you are writing a description of an artwork for someone who can’t see it. “Write a description...that is so detailed that a person who had never seen the artwork could draw it from your description. Choose very specific adjectives for each item in your description” (Walsh-Piper, 108).

“Some of the most sensuous works of art use paint or pastel to depict beautiful flowers, fruit, flesh, or food. Try looking at a work of art with food and write a poem that emphasizes the sensation of taste” (Walsh-Piper, 22).

### **Setting**

“Select an abstract work that could suggest a landscape... abstract artists use line and color to express an idea. Their works are not literally a picture of a landscape, but rather can serve as a metaphor for the experience.” Imagine yourself in the “landscape” you have chosen with its sights, sounds, smells, temperature, and atmosphere. Write a description of the “landscape” for at least ten minutes (Walsh-Piper, 43).

-Example: *Pythoness* by Alfred Leslie (see Appendix I)



“Write about the experience of standing in the museum looking at a work of art. Include unrelated thoughts, feelings, sounds, frustrations, puzzles or questions, and delights. This is not about the art work per se, but about your experience” (Walsh-Piper, 108).

### Character

Find an artwork with several figures, with “major and minor characters.” Write about the scene from each figure’s point of view (Walsh-Piper, 48-49).

“Choose a figural sculpture and write about the sculpture “coming to life,” either in the time it was created or in the present. Develop a character for the sculpture and describe the person’s appearance, stance, gestures, energy level, movement, and how he or she interacts with others” (Walsh-Piper, 99).

-Example: *Joy of the Waters*, by Harriet Whitney Frishmuth (see Appendix II)



Pretend you are a figure in one of the many art works here in the museum. “Describe the person (or persons) who are looking at you as you hang on the wall. What are they looking at? What are they thinking about as they look at you? How have these observers changed over the years? How does it feel to be *unobserved*?” (Trimmer, 24).

Find a painting of human figures (a portrait perhaps) in the museum. From one of the figure’s point of view, write a monologue about how it was made. Keep a few of these questions in mind: “Who painted you? How did you decide on how you would pose? How long and how often did you have to pose? What did the painter’s face look like as he studied you from behind the canvas? When were you allowed to see yourself? What do you think about your portrait?” (Trimmer, 24).

-Example: *Jimmie in Blue Jumper* by Robert Henri (see Appendix III)



### Interpret and Imagine

“Remember that interpretation says what you think the work is really about, what it means and expresses, how the use of media contributes to that effect, and why you think it was made. Your opinion is your own, but it should be based on describable facts of the work. Be persuasive! Refer to what you see in the work to defend your interpretation” (Walsh-Piper, 108).

“Create a conversation between two works of art: two portraits, a portrait and an object, an object and a landscape, and so forth” (Walsh-Piper, 108).

Imagine you are the wearer of one of the masks you find in the museum, such as ones in the African gallery. Write about what you would do, how wearing the mask changes how you act, what it allows you to do, and what proclamations you might make. Let your imagination run wild (Walsh-Piper, 73).

Compose a dialogue with two figures from two works of art that are near each other or on opposite walls. “What do the two of you have to say to each other after all these years? Do you admire, annoy, or avoid one another? What do the people who come and go have to say about the two of you?” (Trimmer, 25).

### **Music as Inspiration**

Listen to music...while you look at a work of art. While listening to the rhythm of the music, consider the visual rhythms and color notes in the artwork. Using the music and image as inspiration, create a short poem that reflects these ideas. Or let the music carry your thoughts and free write for ten minutes (Walsh-Piper, 28).

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#### Sources:

Barnes, Alison, and D. Ryan Lynch. *From the classroom to the museum: understanding faculty-designed assignments in an academic museum*. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 27:5, 487-503.

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--Rochelle Martin (B.A. Photography and Creative Writing, 2014)  
Summer 2013 Intern  
with Tania Said, Director of Education

## Appendix I

Suggesting a Landscape  
Inspired by *Pythoness*, by Alfred Leslie



**Untitled**

The air is damp. Low clouds fill the sky, almost mixing with the fog swirling across the lake. The sun does its best to fight through the thick clouds, its light bright and gray. A river cuts its way through yellow fields, and empties into the lake. I shiver, and pull my sweater tight against my chest as I fold my arms. The wind brushes through the tall golden field and nips my nose. I breathe in deep, smelling dry grass and the winter that will soon arrive. Except for a few brave cicadas, the place is quiet. As I approach the edge of the lake, I swear I hear whispers, faint whispers of spirits and prophecies that have long since passed. Perhaps a few are still waiting to be fulfilled. Drops of water cling to my face like tears. My feet scrape across gritty sand as I stop at the edge, the water an inch away from my toes. I gaze across the lake to see the other side, but my eyes cannot pierce the fog. I wish I could find the words, but I am afraid to break the silence, I stand still like the surface of the lake.

--Rochelle Martin

## Appendix II

### A "Coming to Life Poem"

Inspired by *Joy of the Waters*, by Harriet Whitney Frishmuth



### The Shape of Her

Bent leg, arms raised, her body  
tense, she readies herself to jump  
into the water below. She pauses,  
the height makes her head  
spin and her heart beat faster.  
She's never felt so alive, every  
inch of her skin is on fire, kept  
burning by the sun. She is poised, frozen,  
admiring her reflection in the ripples,  
the shape of her body.  
She does not think about the puddle  
of clothes in the grass behind her  
that are worn, dirty, and need to be mended.  
She does not see that there is no lake beneath her.  
She does not see the marble floor.  
She does not see me standing before her  
nor is she aware of her own immortality.  
Though I am sure if she were to step  
down from her pedestal, she would gladly  
take my place. Perhaps then, I would  
no longer envy her and she would finally jump.

--Rochelle Martin

### Appendix III

Writing from the Subject's Point of View  
Inspired by *Jimmie in Blue Jumper*, by Robert Henri



Untitled

Mother says I have to sit here for an hour or two each day until he's done. The man doesn't say much, he just grabbed one of the chairs from the kitchen, brought it outside, and told me to sit however I liked. I wanted to say I'd rather not sit at all, but I bit my tongue; mother was watching too closely. If I didn't sit quietly, I wouldn't get supper later. I sigh loudly, but when the artist flashes his eyes at me, I stop. Something about his eyes, the way he's studying my face calms me. Most people don't look at me like that. As I wait for the hour to be up, my eyes drift away from the man to the trees and the summer sun shining through them. Beyond our small cabin are the fields where I like to run fast. I glance at the man, and meet his deep eyes. He nods, a corner of his mouth slightly lifted. I jump up and take off for the fields, my feet pounding against the ground; I don't look back.

--Rochelle Martin