



## Art & Artists: *Discussion Guide*

### Overview

For tens of thousands of years, humans have created art—painted on the walls of caves, the ceilings of chapels, and on moveable canvases. They’ve sculpted realistic and abstract forms from marble and scrap metal. The need to communicate through art appears to be an important part of being human. But what is art? It’s a simple question with no simple answers. Help your students explore the diverse creations of artists throughout history with this discussion guide and related videos and activities.

### Classroom Activities

1. Show the video short *What Is Art?*
  - **Discussion:** Ask students to answer the following question from their own perspective: How would they define art? In their opinion, what is *not* art? Can art be evaluated according to “fixed, timeless values,” or do students believe that “there is no objective scale” that can be used to measure it? What leads them to their conclusions?
  - **Art Investigation:** The video shows the cave paintings in Lascaux, France, and says that they “suggest that humans were highly advanced artists in the earliest years of the existence of our species.” Have students visit <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/culture/arcnat/lascaux/en/> where they can take a virtual tour of the cave and learn about how the artists used the rock surface to create perspective. Then, as a class, review the term and investigate other methods artists have used to represent three-dimensional space on a flat surface—for example, the use of linear and atmospheric perspective by Renaissance artists.
  - **Writing Activity**—Share the following quote with students and have them write an essay that either supports or refutes the statement. Instruct them to reference a variety of artists and artworks to back their arguments.

*We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda;  
it is a form of truth.*

— President John F. Kennedy

2. Show the segments “What Was the High Renaissance?” and “Leonardo da Vinci” from *The High Renaissance* video. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
  - **Symmetry Investigation\*:** Along with adding mystery to the *Mona Lisa*, the subject’s asymmetrical features reflect Leonardo da Vinci’s understanding that human faces are not symmetrical. Try the following exercise first with an image of the painting and then with a photograph or image from a magazine. Make two copies of the image, keep one intact, and cut the other right up the center of the face. Hold a flat, square mirror along the cut line of the right side of the face to see what the face looks like if both sides are identical. Repeat with the left side of the face.
  - **Art Analysis:** As students learn about Girolamo Savonarola, the monk responsible for the 1497 “Bonfire of the Vanities,” they see a portrait of him believed to be painted by Fra Bartolomeo, a Dominican friar who studied alongside Raphael. Have students analyze the painting’s careful portrayal of the monk and what the image is intended to communicate. You can find a copy of the painting at the Web Gallery of Art, which includes information about Savonarola, Bartolomeo, and the Latin inscription found beneath the portrait: <http://www.wga.hu/frames-e.html?/html/b/bartolom/fra/savonaro.html>
  - **Research Activity:** In part one, students hear “The High Renaissance was born with the arrival of three giants of art—Leonardo da Vinci, in 1452; Michelangelo Buonarroti, in 1475; and Raphael Sanzio, in 1483.” In part two, they also learn about some of da Vinci’s contributions to the field of art, including his use of chiaroscuro and triangular compositions. Have them research the other two artists and report on their artistic legacies.
3. Show the video *Intro to Pop Art!* (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
  - **Discussion**—Ask students: How do you think the celebration of consumerism by Pop Art changed society? What effects are still visible today? Do you think Andy Warhol was right when he said, “Everyone will be famous for 15 minutes”? Is reality TV a by-product of the Pop Art movement? Why or why not?

*These activities were adapted from those created by Arts4All, Ltd., [www.arts4all.com](http://www.arts4all.com).*

- **Pop Art Music Video**—Working in small groups, have students create a storyboard for a music video that uses Pop Art as the visual medium. They should select a current singer or group and use today’s culture as the source for their images. Create a classroom exhibit of students’ work. If time allows, have students serve as art critics and evaluate the artistic value of each group’s storyboard.
- **Graffiti Art?**—In the video, students learn that Keith Haring got his start painting on empty black panels in the New York City subway system. Using simple outlines, he created a language of icons and symbols. It is

said that he dissolved the boundary between the gallery and the street. Have students compare Haring's work to that of today's graffiti artists. Do they believe today's tags are art or something else? Students should use examples, including images, where possible, to support their argument.

4. Show the video *Alexander Calder*. (Access to *unitedstreaming* is required.)
  - **Vocabulary**—As a class, review the origins and presentation of *Cirque du Calder*, which “predates performance art by 40 years.” Develop a definition for “performance art.” Have students list examples of today's performance art; then revisit the classroom definition and revise it as needed.
  - **Mobile Motion**—Have students read Jean-Paul Sartre's 1946 essay “The Mobiles of Calder” that's referenced in the video; you can either send them to the following Web site or go there yourself and print copies: [www.calder.org](http://www.calder.org). (Click to enter the site; then click “Calder's Life” followed by “Texts” to navigate to the essay.) Challenge them to create their own mobile, or as Sartre said, “pure play of movement.”
  - **Art & Science**—In the video, students learn that Calder created his first kinetic sculpture when he was eleven-years-old and that he didn't aspire to be an artist but, instead, pursued a degree in engineering. His knowledge of engineering played a crucial role in his art—just as Leonardo da Vinci's knowledge of science helped shape his body of work. Have students research the two artists and write an essay that explores how both artists' creations were shaped by the scientific knowledge of their times.

## Academic Standards

This discussion guide addresses the following national standards.

### Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL)

<http://www.mcrel.org/compendium/browse.asp>

- Arts
  - Visual Arts: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and cultures; Understands the characteristics and merits of one's own artwork and the artwork of others
  - Art Connections: Understands connections among the various art forms and other disciplines
- Language Arts
  - Writing: Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions; Gathers and uses information for research purposes
  - Viewing: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media