

# Appendix

## LEADING ART STUDIES

Many of the chapters in the student book end with a full-page image of a work of religious art. These images are to be used as learning opportunities to engage the students in reflecting on the chapter, leading to deeper understanding of the content. But knowing how to “read” a work of art requires skill and practice! Here are two methods that will help your students engage with religious art.

### Preparation for Both Methods

To begin, identify a piece of art connected to your religious topic or theme. In many chapters, we have already identified one art piece. The chapters in the student ebook contain an extra visual feature, some of which could be used for additional art studies. You might also search the internet for a painting that your students are most likely familiar with, preferably one that depicts a biblical scene that has already been studied in class (e.g., *The Creation of Adam*, by Michelangelo [Genesis 2:4–7]).

Next, identify some basic facts about the work of art to share with the students. Or, you could have the students research this information. Often background on the art can be found on the website where you found the image or through an internet search. If it is a modern piece of art, you can sometimes contact the artist directly—they are often very happy to tell you about their art piece.

Some basic facts to begin with could include:

- the title of the piece
- where the piece is located (for example, a museum or church)
- who the artist is
- when (approximately) it was created
- what medium was used to create the piece (i.e., oil, pen and ink, fresco, marble)

### Method 1: Basic Art Study

If you are going to use an art study for only a part of a class, you might follow this process.

1. Ask the students to examine the art for a few minutes in silence to make initial observations.
2. Draw their attention to the specific details of the artwork using questions such as these:
  - Compare the biblical story to the art. Is it accurate? What is missing? What has been added?
  - What are the facial expressions, and what do they reveal about the emotions of the people in the art piece?

- Notice postures, gestures, and stances reflected in body positioning. What do they tell us about the attitudes of the people depicted?
  - How would you describe the mood of the image? Notice color, shapes, forms, textures, and lines.
  - How does the image use light and shadow? In other words, what dramatic emphasis is created by the artist's use of light and shadow?
  - How does the image depict the passage of time? For example, is it like a snapshot of a single moment, or is it like a storyboard, depicting many moments at once?
  - Notice the objects depicted in the painting, both the ones that seem central and the ones that seem peripheral or hidden.
  - What do you think the artist wants us to focus on?
3. Discuss the symbolism in the art, using one of the following means:
- Share with the students a list of symbols and their meanings that you have compiled in advance.
  - Ask the students to research the symbolic meanings of people, objects, colors, and gestures that have significance in the Christian context. You may need to guide the students through their research by offering examples of Christian symbols commonly found in art. For example, a palm branch of victory carried in someone's hand or arm often indicates that the person is a martyr.

## Method 2: Advanced Art Study

If you really want to go deep in engaging the students in an art study, you might take most of a class period and possibly make it a written assignment using any combination of steps from this process:

1. Ask the students to examine the art for a few minutes in silence to make initial observations.
2. Draw their attention to the specific details of the artwork using these questions:
  - Who is represented? Who is left out?
  - What topic did the artist consider important enough to make a painting of it?
  - When was the artwork made?
    - Does it represent the artist's era or another time? Or is it a combination of the two?
    - Does it depict real time or sacred time (the time of eternity or Heaven or prayer)? Or is it a combination of the two?
  - Where is the action taking place? Is it inside or outside? Is it in some faraway place or where the painting was made?
  - Why was it painted? Why did the artist choose this topic?

3. Share the following remarks to help guide the students in uncovering the culture and the religious beliefs and practices of the people at the time the art was created:
  - The community in which an artist lives and worships influences that artist. The artist is also affected by family, upbringing, and social, political, and economic factors.
  - If an artist created a painting at the request of a patron, that piece of art will likely reflect something about the patron.
  - When an artist makes a painting, they include some details intentionally just because that is the way things are done at that time in that place.
4. Continue by asking the students to research pertinent questions on the religious, political, economic, and social beliefs and practices that might have influenced the artist.
  - Religious Questions
    - What was this community's understanding of God?
    - What was this community afraid of?
    - Did this community experience a lot of suffering? How did they understand suffering?
    - Did this community experience a lot of evil? How did they understand evil?
    - What gave this community joy?
    - How did this community express love?
    - How did this community understand salvation?
    - What was the relationship between this community and creation?
  - Political Questions
    - Who was in power at the time, and who was not?
    - How was political power exercised (money and influence, arms and fighting, and so on)?
    - How did the people without power feel about those who had it?
    - How did the people with power feel about those without? (Did they even think about them?)
    - How much freedom to speak their minds did average people have?
    - Who had basic political rights, and who did not?
    - Did the Church have political power? If so, in whose favor did it exercise that power?
  - Economic Questions
    - How were artists paid? Who paid them?
    - Who had money, and who did not?
    - What economic opportunities were available to which people?

- What was the economic and political agenda of the person or institution that paid the artist?
- What economic structure does the painting try to communicate?
- Did the Church have economic power? If so, in whose favor did it exercise that power?
- Social Questions
  - How were ethnic minorities viewed and treated?
  - How were people of other religions viewed and treated?
  - How were children viewed and treated?
  - How were women viewed and treated?
  - How much did the Church influence social relationships within the family, village, city, and so on?
  - Were people formal and polite or casual and coarse?
  - Did groups exhibit different social norms? How was the society split?

### TEACHER NOTE

You may want to go through the steps of each method yourself, to familiarize yourself with the two processes before choosing one and leading it with your students.

## Resources

- Christian symbols and their meanings:  
*[www.fisheaters.com/symbols.html](http://www.fisheaters.com/symbols.html)*
- Finding Christian art: *[www.smp.org/resourcecenter/resource/2866/](http://www.smp.org/resourcecenter/resource/2866/)*
- *Beyond the Written Word: Exploring Faith through Christian Art*, by Eileen M. Daily (Saint Mary's Press, 2005)