family guide

Artists everywhere have stories to tell that speak to audiences across time, places, and cultures. Just like authors who tell tales with words, artists use visual language to invite us into a world of images, ideas, and imagination. Lend your imagination to an exploration of forms, styles, techniques, and materials in Conversations: African and African American Artworks in Dialogue from the Collections of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art and Camille O. and William H. Cosby Jr.

Encounter some of the common threads that weave our stories together as part of the narrative of the human family. **Look closely** at works of art—what materials and techniques are used by artists to express their ideas? **Imagine** what story each artist might be telling. **Share** your ideas with those around you.

We respond to works of art for many different reasons. Build your visual vocabulary with the words you find in **purple** to help you exchange ideas with others in your group.
Use this guide to help you “read” the artworks on display through thoughtful looking. Learn the ABCs of visual vocabulary—form, style, material, and technique—and reflect on the special role that art plays in all our lives.
A **sculpture** is a three-dimensional (height + width + depth) work of art made by carving, modeling, or welding **materials** like wood, stone, metal, and clay into works of art.

These two sculptures were created approximately 100 years apart. The Kongo artist and Elizabeth Catlett created them to provide a visual representation of motherhood in their own cultures. What elements are alike? different?

Look for **symbols** in works of art that express or represent a particular idea, quality, or characteristic.

An **abstraction** uses imaginative lines, shapes, textures, and colors to create new ways to represent the ideas associated with a person, place, or thing. An abstract style can be puzzling, with details and symbols that might require more thought.

What materials are used on these two artworks? Which sculpting techniques? How do these choices change the way the artworks look?
Sculptors work in three dimensions, the way objects exist in the space around us. The Senegalese artist Ousmane Sow has chosen as his subject the 18th century Haitian leader Toussaint Louverture. By constructing an artwork larger than life, the artist recognizes the important role of this historical figure and asks the viewer to look up to see the commanding gaze of the figure towering above us. Do you need to know the history of Haiti to feel these powerful emotions?

An nganga is a ritual specialist who communicates with the spirit world and offers spiritual guidance through the use of a carved figure called an nkisi. After the sculpture was completed, the nganga often attached or hid additional substances inside the nkisi, increasing the figure’s sacred and healing power. These accumulative materials reveal how the object’s form changed over time.

What materials were used to make these objects? Do any of the materials look like they have been added to the sculptures later on?

How do the elements of these sculptures create powerful presences?

Stand tall like Toussaint Louverture. Now pose with your arm raised like the nkisi—describe how the different poses make you feel.
A **portrait** represents a particular person and displays his or her personality and character. The artist often frames the sitter from head to waist and includes clues about the person’s social position or status. Joshua Johnston painted this portrait of Mrs. Thomas Donovan and her daughter Elinor more than 200 years ago!

**FUN FACT**
Fruit was often used by artists as a symbol of kindness, abundance, humility, and modesty.

A **genre** painting is a scene from everyday life. Notice how the artist, James Amos Porter, uses the light glowing from the doorway to direct our eye to the mother’s face. Where does your eye go next? Porter chose to place the forms in his painting in a triangular **composition**. Can you see it? Follow the mother’s arms down to the laundry basket and then to her daughter in the background.

Realistic details can tell us a lot about the subjects of portrait and genre paintings. Notice what each person is holding in these two artworks.

What would you be holding in your portrait? What would it say about your personality?

Both of these artworks represent a mother and child, but their clothes and poses are very different. Describe how they represent different versions of life.
Naturalism is an artistic style that aims to depict someone or something as observed in the real world.

Notice the man and the boy are not looking at each other or the viewer. What are they doing? What is the artist telling us?

In this painting, Henry Ossawa Tanner wanted to paint a scene viewers would recognize from their everyday lives. Does this scene remind you of anything from your own daily life?

How does the artist use light in this painting? What might it symbolize?

What words describe how you feel when looking at this scene?
Realism is an artistic technique where an artist paints accurate details of the world around us in order to make the viewer feel a certain way. Realist paintings often make the viewer feel as if they are inside the painting.

Hughie Lee-Smith uses realism to create the illusion of three dimensions. At the center of the painting, a woman has her back to the viewer—what do you suppose she is thinking?

Do you think this painting represents a real or an imagined landscape? Which details make you think so?

Pose like the girl in the painting. Imagine what you might see or hear in the distance.

Describe some of the details in the landscape. Do they make you feel haunted, sad, or happy?
Archibald J. Motley, Jr.’s *paintings* depict many scenes of African American city life. In *Stomp*, Motley uses details to express the sophistication of jazz music and the excitement of crowded dance floors at a late night Chicago dance club.

Malick Sidibé used his camera to capture every detail of an African dance club through *photographs*. Photographers like Sidibé frame real scenes to express ideas about their subjects. How is this different from how painters create artworks? This photograph shows a couple dancing together in Mali.

How do these works look similar? How do they look different? How do the techniques used to make the artworks change the way they look?

Imagine the mood of the painted scene. Now imagine the mood of the photographed one. How are they similar? different?

Describe the details you see in the painting and the photograph. Can you spot any that are the same in both?
A **still life** is an arrangement of everyday objects, such as fruit or flowers, used as subjects in drawings, paintings, and photographs.

While in France, Lōis Mailou Jones captured light, color, and atmosphere in this dazzling still life painting that includes a landscape in the background.
A **landscape** is a scenic view depicting natural features like the sky, mountains, trees, deserts, and rivers. A **cityscape** is a view depicting features made by humans such as skyscrapers, roads, and houses. Which of these paintings is a landscape? Which is a cityscape?

Look for the place in the painting of the waterfall where the earth meets the sky. This is called the **horizon line**. Can you find it? Is there a horizon line in the cityscape?

David Koloane’s cityscape and Robert S. Duncanson’s landscape both have a figure in the **foreground**. Can you find them? Think about the size of the figures. Which is bigger and which is smaller? Why do you think the artists chose to paint their subjects different sizes compared to the **background**?

What words come to mind when you look at these two artworks? peaceful? busy? noisy? calm?

Which would you rather visit, the landscape or the cityscape?

Describe what you would hear, smell, and feel in each painting.
Bearden was inspired by music, especially the blues and jazz. What sounds do you hear?

Describe how a collage looks different from the other art techniques shown in the exhibition.

Romare Bearden was a master of collage and improvised ways of combining different materials and inventing new surfaces and forms. In this collage depicting a jazz musician, the artist creates a composition of lively angles, colors, and patterns to convey an illusion of sound and movement.

A collage (ko-LAAHj), from the French “to glue,” is a technique combining paint with various materials such as magazine and newspaper clippings, colored paper, cloth, or other found objects that are then glued to the paper or canvas.

How many shapes and colors can you find?
Solomon Irein Wangboje made this image of an African drummer using a special technique known as linocut—he cut into a piece of linoleum, rubbed ink onto it, then pressed the carving onto a sheet of paper to make a print. (Linocuts can also be inked and printed again to repeat the same image many times, like a stamp.) Carving the image first allows the artist to emphasize angles, patterns, and bold forms, like a drummer would emphasize rhythms.
Textile artists use **cloth** and **fibers** as materials to construct both useful and artistic works. Faith Ringgold is an artist known for her painted story quilts, which combine **painting** techniques with **quilted fabric** materials.

Notice how the artist conveys the theme of family by repeated use of painted portraits and sewn quilt squares. What story do you think Ringgold was telling? The carefully constructed composition displays many artistic choices—division of forms, space, size, shape, color, and pattern—combined to express both a feeling of improvisation and unity.

African artists have a long history of producing textiles. Some techniques include loom woven, factory printed, photo-transfer, appliqué, and embroidery. Can you find examples of some of these techniques in the exhibition? Do you think making a cloth using such methods would be easy or challenging?
PAGE 1, LOWER LEFT
Gerard Sekoto
1913–1993, South Africa
Boy and the Candle (detail) 1943
Oil on canvas
46.2 x 36 cm (18 3/16 x 13 1/4 in.)
National Museum of African Art, museum purchase, 2000-3-1

PAGE 2, LEFT
Kongo artist, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Female figure with child (niongo)
Late 19th to early 20th century
Wood, pigment, mirror glass
54 x 27.9 x 26.4 cm
(21 1/4 x 10 3/8 x 10 1/4 in.)
National Museum of African Art, gift of the Eugene and Agnes E. Meyer Foundation, 72-41-4

PAGE 2, RIGHT
Elizabeth Catlett
1915–2012, United States
Maternity 1980
Marble
66 x 61 x 21.6 cm (26 x 24 x 8 1/2 in.)
Photograph by Frank Stewart, © Catlett Mora Family Trust/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

PAGE 3, LEFT
Ousmane Sow
born 1935, Senegal	Toussaint Louverture et la vieille esclave (Toussaint Louverture and the Elderly Slave) 1989
Mixed media (iron, earth, jute, straw)
220 x 100 x 110 cm
(86 5/8 x 39 3/8 x 43 5/16 in.)
National Museum of African Art, museum purchase, through exchange from Emil Eisenberg, and Mr. and Mrs. Norman Robbins, and with funds from Stuart Bohart and Barbara Portman, 2009-8-1

PAGE 3, RIGHT
Kongo artist, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Male figure
Late 19th to mid-20th century
Wood, glass, iron, pigment, cloth, plant fiber, horn, nails
42.7 x 26.6 x 19.3 cm
(13/16 x 10 1/2 x 7 5/8 in.)
National Museum of African Art, gift of Dr. and Mrs. Robert Kuhn, 91-22-1

PAGE 4, LEFT
Joshua Johnston
c. 1765–c. 1830, Baltimore area, Maryland
Mrs. Thomas Donovan and Elinor Donovan c. 1799
Oil on canvas
76.8 x 64.8 cm (30 1/4 x 25 1/2 in.)
Photograph by Frank Stewart

PAGE 4, RIGHT
James Amos Porter
1905–1970, United States
Washerwoman n.d.
Oil on canvas
45.8 x 33 cm (18 x 13 in.)
Photograph by Frank Stewart

PAGE 5
Henry Ossawa Tanner
1859–1937, United States
The Thankful Poor (detail) 1894
Oil on canvas
90.3 x 112.5 cm (35 1/2 x 44 1/4 in.)
Photograph by Frank Stewart

PAGE 6
Hughie Lee-Smith
1915–1999, United States
Festival’s End #2 1987
Oil on canvas
97.8 x 98.5 cm (38 1/2 x 38 3/4 in.)
Photograph by Frank Stewart, © Estate of Hughie Lee-Smith/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

PAGE 7, LEFT
Archibald J. Motley Jr.
1891–1981, United States
Stomp (detail) 1927
Oil on canvas
76.3 x 91.5 cm (30 x 36 in.)
Photograph by Frank Stewart

PAGE 7, RIGHT
Malick Sidibé
born 1925, Mali
Nuit de Noël (Happy-Club) 1963, printed 2008
Gelatin silver print
Sheet: 61 x 50 cm (24 x 19 11/16 in.)
Image: 42.5 x 43 cm (16 3/4 x 16 15/16 in.)
National Museum of African Art, museum purchase, 2009-12-3

PAGE 8
Lois Mailou Jones
1905–1998, United States
Nature Morte aux Geraniums (detail) 1952
Oil on canvas
73.3 x 59.8 cm (28 7/8 x 23 1/2 in.)
Photograph by Frank Stewart, permission courtesy of the Lois Mailou Jones Pierre-Noel Trust

PAGE 9, LEFT
David Koloane
born 1930, South Africa
Moon and Dog 1995
Acrylic on canvas
109.3 x 104 cm (43 1/16 x 40 15/16 in.)
National Museum of African Art, museum purchase, 96-31-1

PAGE 9, RIGHT
Robert S. Duncanson
1821–1872, United States
Falls of Minnehaha 1862
Oil on canvas
92 x 71.8 cm (36 1/4 x 28 1/4 in.)
Photograph by Frank Stewart

PAGE 10
Romare Bearden
1911–1988, United States
Finding in at Barron’s (detail) 1980
Collage on Masonite
100.8 x 75.5 cm (39 5/8 x 29 3/4 in.)
Photograph by Frank Stewart, © Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

PAGE 11
Solomon Irié Wangboje
1930–1998, Nigeria
The Music Maker—Mood V (detail) 1965
Linocut on paper
36.2 x 29.8 cm (14 1/4 x 11 3/4 in.)
National Museum of African Art, gift of Ambassador and Mrs. Benjamin Hill Brown Jr., 76-3-18

PAGE 12
Faith Ringgold
born 1938, South Africa
Camille’s Husband’s Birthday Quilt (detail) 1988
Painted and pieced canvas and silk
269.3 x 207.8 cm (106 x 81 3/4 in.)
Photograph by Frank Stewart, Faith Ringgold © 1988

Now choose a work of art that you liked best. Explain your choice to your group.
A commonly found material in households across Africa is a dried calabash (gourd). They are often hollowed out and used as containers to carry water, food, and drink. Larger ones are made into percussion instruments. Artists use a technique called pyroengraving—carefully cutting into the hard surface with a heated knife or blade—to create finely detailed designs.

Looking at these calabashes, count how many different shapes and patterns you can find.

Create your own work of art at home or at school and write a story that draws on some of the ideas that you collected today!

Did you miss something in the exhibition? You don’t have to see everything at one time. Visit the museum again and again!

Want to find out more? Visit the museum online at africa.si.edu.

THE ARTS CAN TAKE US PLACES!