Sketching & Sculpture

Drawing is like making an expressive gesture with the advantage of permanence.
— Henri Matisse

Introduction: Try this!
Looking for ways to encourage students to closely examine works of art? Try sketching in the galleries! This resource offers ideas and activities for using sketching to engage students grades 5 through 9 as they explore the National Gallery’s sculpture collection; however, the exercises can be modified for use with different ages and for paintings or works at other museums.

Why Sketching?
For centuries artists have drawn in front of works of art as a way to learn from them, understand their form, and appreciate their essential qualities. Sketching can be powerful even without formal art training connect with a work of art and see it in new ways:

• encouraging longer and more careful observation
• promoting an appreciation for different aspects of materials (color, line, shape, form, texture) and understanding of how materials affect an object’s appearance
• providing a lasting record of a viewer’s response

What’s the Big Idea?
The most successful museum visits focus on a few big ideas and a limited number of objects, emphasizing the quality of students’ experiences instead of the number of objects seen. Would you like to focus your visit on abstract or figurative sculpture, the work of a particular artist, or the elements of art? The possible choices are endless.

Now Your Turn:
Visiting the museum yourself is the best way to plan a tour. If that is not possible, you can explore National Gallery collections online at www.nga.gov. There, you can learn which works are currently on view and get information about them.

Tips for Effective Sketching:
• Keep sketchbooks and give clear directions.
• Remind students that sketching is about looking and copying works of art and not about how they draw.
• Encourage students to draw what they see and that they are not allowed to copy them with the class.
Try sketching in the classroom. To familiarize students with sketching from objects in the museum, try it first in the classroom. Prepare to the classroom wall-to-wall foamosa as the students draw quickly in the galleries.

At the Museum

Compare/Contrast

Before sketching, discuss with students the purpose of their visit and review museum rules.

In front of each work of art, invite student observations: Query them to draw careful looking and
some prompts: 2.

What do you see? Encourage students to support their responses with visual evidence from the sculpture.

For a challenging twist, have students draw without looking at the paper. This is called blind contour drawing. Explain that their drawings may look strange at first but that they should not be discouraged. This activity helps students to focus on the object and move smoothly back and forth to record what they see.


discussion: Are there any more questions? Did students notice anything while doing this? Further encourage students to look for relationships between art and architecture.

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