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### Two Questions, With Variations

#### 1) “What do you see?”

In discussions of works of art, I ask this question of a group and do not provide answers myself. I encourage the individual speakers to mention only one thing that they see, so as not to exhaust the exercise. I encourage everyone to respond or sometimes “make” them by calling on individuals or taking turns in a circle.

It is difficult to get people to say what they see because we tend to assume that what we see everyone already sees, and we are reluctant to be obvious. However, we see different things and see them differently, and our language influences how others will see.

If we identify something in a work of art inaccurately, the discussion that follows will be faulty. It is important for the group to gently correct misperceptions or inaccurate articulations. Sometimes we have to conclude we are not sure of something that we see in an artwork.

Sometimes we tell what we *infer* rather than what we *see*. We should know the difference. I don’t *see* panic in *Guernica*; I see figures and shapes in the way Picasso painted them, and they lead me to interpret panic in the painting. It is important to distinguish between fact and interpretation, although the two overlap. Interpretations require evidence in their support.

Similarly, we do not *see* beauty in Monet’s paintings of water lilies. We see colors and textures, and we may *judge* them to be beautiful. It is important to know differences between describing and judging; otherwise we think our judgments are factual when they are actually arguable.

#### 2) “What’s it about?”

This is the essential question for art and life. There are many ways to phrase the question to keep the conversation going. “What does the work express?” “What is my emotional response to the work?” “What in the work brings forth your thoughts and feelings?” “What do you think about what she said?” “What else?” “Say more.”

There are different *kinds* of questions for works of art:

- “What do you think the work might mean to the artist who made it?” (Artist’s Intention)
- “What might it express to the patron who commissioned it?” (Patron’s Desire)
- “How might those who saw it when it was first made have understood it?” (Original Audience)
- “How does it fit with other works in this gallery?” (Curator’s Intent)
- “What might it mean to us today?” (Current Audience)
- “Most importantly, might it have any *personal meaning to your life*?” (Significance to the Viewer)

I can start with any of these questions, ask them one at a time, and rarely do we apply all of them to one work of art. I do not provide answers, but invite speculation from the group based on their observations. Nor do I present historical information about the work, other than what may be available on a wall label.

My desire is for people to construct meanings based on what they see, what they hear from others in the group, and based on all that they already know about life. Some insights and interpretations will be better than others. The group will know this by comparing what they hear to what they see in the work. I do not need to be the authority.

Some of what they say will be very incomplete, overly speculative, or even “wrong,” but their curiosity might be aroused enough that they will seek further answers in the bookstore, online, or at the library. The goal is not that they find the “right” answers but that they come back to the museum with friends and family and have enjoyable conversations of about art and life, independent of a tour guide.