

Talking with Students about the Human Body and Nudity in Art

A Resource for Educators

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The Art Institute of Chicago is home to a [world-class collection](#) that spans centuries and the globe. Each year, the museum welcomes thousands of K–12 students who engage with our collection in person or online. The human body is universal—everyone has one—and artists throughout history have been curious about many things, including people and how they look. You will find many examples of the human body in art from different times and cultures across the Art Institute’s vast collection.

Encountering and discussing such works, particularly when they include nudity, can at times feel awkward for teachers as well as students. But these conversations are important. When approached with care, they not only foster a deeper understanding of art and culture but can also promote positive body image and respectful peer relationships among students.

This resource includes potential approaches and talking points to support such conversations.

Methods of Approach

When talking about the human body and nudity in art with students, consider the following.

- Be sensitive to their personal and academic needs and keep in mind that not every image/depiction of the body is appropriate for every viewer. Consider carefully each student’s
 - Age/stage of development
 - Culture/religion
 - Familiarity and comfort level with you as a teacher

You will also want to consider the potential reaction of parents and school administrators.

- Take a "no big deal" attitude to the discussion. Students will be more at ease in the conversation if you approach the subject with ease. With younger students, it can help to relate images in the artwork to age-appropriate common experiences, such as bathing, dressing, etc.
- Set group agreements ahead of the discussion to help guide a productive and inclusive conversation. These might include:
 - Being curious and open to learning
 - Showing respect and suspending judgment
- Be thoughtful about the language you use to discuss nudity in art and remember that a wide variety of bodies exist in art and in life.
 - Refrain from using judgemental words like "good" or "bad" when talking about representations of bodies.
 - Offer positive and inclusive framing around a variety of body types and gender expressions without suggesting a norm.
- Consider giving students the choice to view certain works of art or not without inhibiting access for the whole group.

Talking Points

Use the talking points following each question to facilitate conversations with your students.

- *What is art? How is this art?*
 - Art is an object or experience created through an expression of skill or imagination.
 - It reflects and expresses the wide range of human culture, experience, and feeling.
 - Even if you don’t care for a work of art personally, you can still choose to see it as a part of human creativity and respect the right of the artist to explore their subject.

Talking with Students about the Human Body and Nudity in Art

- *Why do so many works of art focus on the body or nudity?*
 - Every person has a body. And artists have always been curious about people—how they look and how they act.
 - The human form and human sexuality are natural, and different people have different thoughts and feelings about the body, nudity, and sexuality that can be expressed through art.
 - Ideals of human beauty are both cultural and personal; they vary widely among cultures and people. Art is one way people can express, explore, and question these ideals.
- *Why has this artist used nudity in their art?*
 - Artists make choices in the creation of their work, including in how they show the human form.
 - They may choose to show nudity for a particular reason, like to showcase and better understand the structure of the human body or to provoke a reaction.
 - Sometimes nudity is not the main idea of a work of art..
- *Why does this art make me feel awkward?*
 - Art can make us feel many different ways: inspired, curious, delighted, awkward, silly, embarrassed, angry, confused, etc. That’s okay!
 - Nudity is usually private, so it can feel awkward to experience nudity in art with other people. That’s okay, too!

Key Concepts to Support Discussion of the Human Body in Art

It is valuable to extend the conversation beyond nudity to a more general discussion of the human body in art.

- “Representation” means how someone or something is shown by the artist. A “subject” in art is the person who is represented in the artwork. Have your students consider how a subject is represented in a particular work of art.
 - *What do you learn about the subject from this artwork?*
 - *Do they look strong/vulnerable/proud, etc.? How does the artist show this?*
- Artists make choices in their work. These choices are personal and are influenced by who they are and when and where they live.
 - For younger students: share relevant context about the artist’s life and work.
 - For older students: encourage them to learn more about the artist’s identities, lived experiences, and the cultural and historical contexts in which they live(d).
 - *Now that you have more information, look again. Do you see anything new?*
 - *What do you think the artist hoped to show or say about this subject? Why?*
- Discussing a subject’s agency or power in how they are represented encourages students to have agency and autonomy over their bodies and how they are represented, too.
 - Ask students of all ages:
 - *How would you like to be shown in a picture?*
 - *What are the interests, skills, and qualities that make you who you are?*
 - *If you were to create an image of yourself that makes those qualities visible, what would you show?*
 - Extend the conversation with older students:
 - *Do you think the subject of this work had agency or power in how they were represented?*
 - *Do you think this is how they would choose to be seen? Why or why not?*